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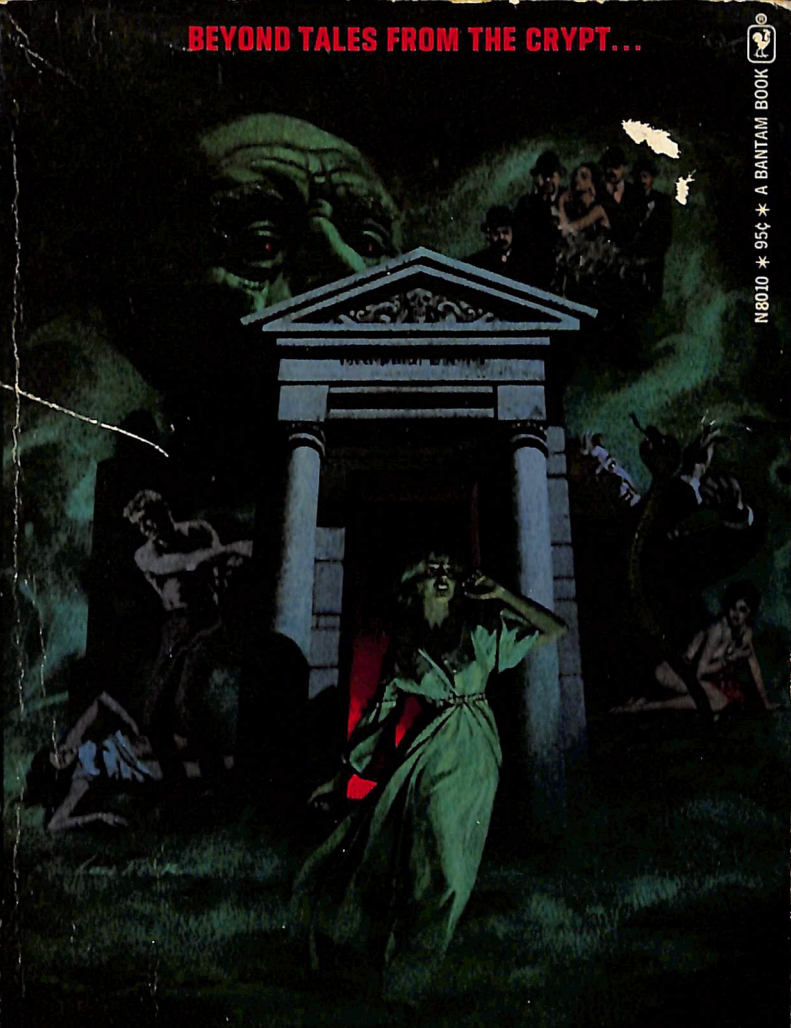

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THE VAULT OF HORROR

Bantam Books by Jack Oleck

TALES FROM THE CRYPT
THE VAULT OF HORROR

THE VAULT OF HORROR

JACK OLECK

Based on stories by
Al Feldstein and Bill Gaines

Originally published in the
comic magazines
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and
"The Vault of Horror"
by William M. Gaines

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1

The shadows seemed, to Rogers, to be somehow threatening. There is a loneliness about a nearly deserted office building at night that is almost otherworldly, and he did not like it. He did not like it at all. It was as if the swarms of secretaries and executives and clerks who were the life blood of the building by day had, with their going, left it a corpse. His footsteps echoed eerily along the corridor and even the harsh glare of the overhead lights seemed unable to dispel the gloom that, here and there, made long fingers of darkness where a nook or a bend in the corridor wall cut off the brilliance.

The corridor was unaccountably cold, it had the damp chilliness of a mausoleum, so as he walked on, he pulled the collar of his seedy coat tighter about his throat and mentally damned the engineer who had turned down the building's heating system as soon as the sun set.

At the end of the corridor, where several sets of sliding doors indicated that he had at last reached the elevators that were his destination, he jabbed viciously at the DOWN button and then waited irritably. The sooner he was able to leave this hollow, echoing refrigerator, the better.

It was only seconds, but it seemed an inordinately long time before one of the elevators arrived and an even longer time before its doors slid smoothly open. But that was just his imagination, of course. The atmosphere of the building was getting on his nerves. In the elevator, he pressed the GROUND FLOOR button and staggered slightly as the elevator resumed its downward course.

Still, though he could not really have said why, he felt uneasy. His eyes followed the flashing floor lights. He had entered the elevator on the 28th floor. Now he was at the 26th, the 25th—

The elevator halted suddenly, taking him by surprise, so that his knees buckled slightly and the tall man who entered as the doors slid open glanced at him curiously. The man, however, paid him no further attention. Locked in his own thoughts, he too pressed the GROUND FLOOR button. Again, the elevator descended. And again, at 22, it stopped. Rogers, impatient, cursed under his breath.

But only for a moment, until he was distracted. This time, there was no mistaking the disdain in the eyes of the man who entered. The look came and went quickly, but there was no missing it. Damn snob! Rogers came close to speaking aloud. The man was almost too well-dressed, too prosperous, too perfect. Everything about him, from the spotless collar of his white shirt to the knife-edged crease in his trousers to the impossibly brilliant shine of his shoes, shrieked of money and of the meticulous attention to sartorial detail that only money makes possible.

Would they never reach the ground floor? Rogers' own eyes, as they watched the newcomer's carefully manicured finger punch at the button, mirrored his hostility.

But the next passenger to enter the elevator, at least, gave him no cause for complaint. The latest arrival, when he had entered the elevator at the 20th floor and punched the GROUND FLOOR button in turn, paid no attention to his companions. One fist on his hip, he stood in an unconsciously flamboyant pose and Rogers,

idly curious, wondered what he might be. A performer, perhaps. The music halls were filled with his type . . .

Ah! The latest rider to walk through the sliding doors was more to his liking. Sunburned and intense, and obviously uncomfortable in an ill-fitting business suit, *his* finger, as it depressed the button, was stained with paint. There was even paint under his fingernail. An artist?

The elevator continued its downward plunge. 3—2—1 . . .

At last. It would be good to get out into the street, out of this skyscraping tomb that had somehow made him so tense . . .

A glint of puzzlement came into his eyes. The elevator had not stopped at the ground floor. Even as he stared, the light behind the GROUND FLOOR button went out and another flashed on. B? The basement? But the elevator still did not come to a halt. The B button, too, went dark as another blinked on—SB—and the elevator came to rest at last.

"Sub-basement?" The words left his lips before he was aware that he had spoken them.

"But I pressed 'Ground'." The tall man, the one who had entered the elevator just after Rogers, was looking at the others questioningly.

"So did I." That was the actor. For lack of a better designation, Rogers thought of him that way.

Only the artist remained silent as the last man, the one who was so impossibly impeccable, tugged at the elevator doors and said, "Why doesn't it open?" The artist, still silent, was the only one who thought to try the DOOR OPEN button.

Instantly, the doors slid back on their tracks.

"What the devil!" The tall man, as he stepped through the open doors, voiced what they were all thinking. "It looks like some sort of club."

Beyond the doors, a large, expensively furnished room made an attractive vista. Leather armchairs, sporting prints, and a plush carpet did indeed make it look like an exclusive men's club.

"Never knew there was one in the building." The actor—Rogers had guessed rightly, his name was Sebastian and he *was* an actor of sorts—spoke to no one in particular. But as if his words were a signal, the man whose shirt collar was almost too spotless and whose shoes were almost too well shined, turned angrily back to the elevator. *His* name was Critchit, and he was a man who had no patience with surprises.

He had, however, even less patience when he reached automatically for the button panel beside the elevator doors and found none. There was no panel. His mouth, when he swung back to face the others, was tight with anger.

But only he had given way to temper. The others were looking around the room, and their obvious uncertainty drove away his anger and replaced it with the beginnings of an unaccustomed tension. The room, except for the securely locked elevator doors behind them, had no other exit.

"There's no way out," Rogers said unnecessarily, and flushed, uncomfortably aware that the others were staring at him.

"No." The artist, a hint of a smile momentarily relieving the hardness of his expression, was staring across the room to where a number of chairs had been pulled up around a table. On the table sat an elaborately chased silver serving tray and on the tray were several cut-glass decanters and a siphon of soda. "Looks like we'll be here for a while." His head inclined toward the elevator doors. "But someone's bound to come down soon. "Why not make the best of it?" Another nod, this time toward the table, left no doubt of his meaning.

For a moment, no one moved. The club—if it was a club—was inviting, but strange. A club with solid stone walls formed of blocks so perfectly joined that the walls seemed to have been poured from concrete? A club with no guests, no attendants?

"Well—" Critchit, as though it were his right, took the lead. "Why not?"

It was he, too, who took over the table when they

had seated themselves around it. A decanter in his hand, he poured a drink for each. Carefully, expertly.

"There." Sipping at his own drink seemed to relax him, to make him appear less demanding. His eyes, wandering about the room, were no longer angry, but curious. "What a strange situation to be in. It's almost like a dream."

"Oh, dreams are much more frightening than this. At least, mine are." Rogers, embarrassed again, did not go on.

"In what way?" Critchit, by nature accustomed to putting every moment of his time to good use, had seen his embarrassment but still asked the question. After all, one had to find *some* way to lighten a tedious situation.

"In a strange, mysterious, unworldly way." The center of all eyes, Rogers had no choice but to continue. "Totally unbelievable. And yet—"

"Yet?"

"And yet—so real." Rogers seemed to be remembering something. "Almost—as if it could happen."

The others, interested, were watching him more intently now. But it was Critchit, again, who spoke for all. "Tell us about it."

Rogers hesitated. "All right," he said. "I will."

2

The hotel room suited Rogers' personality perfectly. Third rate and completely nondescript, it smelled faintly of dust and stale linen, and yet it had not yet quite surrendered to mediocrity. Once elegant, it wore its shabbiness like a badge of defiance; the defiance was a kind of bitter, desperate miasma that hung in the air—desperate, and yet with a tinge of hope. Time and lack of money had set their mark on the room, but more time and enough money could erase that mark—and so it was with Rogers.

He did not think of it in quite that manner, of course, but the thought was in his mind as he took his necktie from where it had been carelessly tossed on the scratched chest of drawers and slipped it under his shirt collar.

Money. A man was nothing without money. But soon—. The thought left him. Outside, in the corridor that smelled even more strongly of dust than did the room in which he stood, someone was moving. He could hear footsteps approaching along the corridor, and the footsteps were familiar. Yet even so, he did not go to the door at once. The footsteps sounded as though they might belong to Clive, but he could not be certain. It was best, at this stage of the game, that

he show himself to as few people as possible. Squinting unconsciously, so that his face took on the look of a ferret's, he turned to face the door.

The knock, when it came, made him draw in his breath. With one motion, he whipped the still unknotted necktie from under his collar and tossed it back onto the chest of drawers. He was ready. But even then, he did not immediately answer the knock. Still careful, he crossed to the door and stood with one hand poised above the chain latch that secured it.

"Clive?"

"Who else?"

There was no mistaking the voice, but when he opened the door it was only far enough so that he could see into the corridor. In the corridor, Clive smiled his oily smile and then, when the door swung wide, walked into the room without speaking. A big man, he took three steps and then turned to face Rogers, and if Rogers had about him the look of a ferret, Clive had about him the look of a lynx.

"Well?" Rogers had closed the door behind him and his voice was impatient. He did not like Clive; Clive was too shrewd, too wise. But he needed him. At least for now.

Clive's smile widened into a grin. Men like Rogers were no novelty to a private investigator; such men always had something to hide, and a man who has something to hide can almost always be bullied. He did not bother to answer when Rogers glared at him and spat the word again.

"Well?"

Instead, he moved leisurely to where a bottle of whiskey and two glasses stood on a night table. Carefully, elaborately, enjoying his moment, he poured himself a drink and raised his glass as if in a toast.

To Rogers, the gesture was maddening. His question was almost a snarl. "Did you find her?"

Clive's nod was slow, deliberate.

"Where?"

Savoring the moment, prolonging it, Clive sipped

from his glass, then shifted the glass from his right hand to his left. His right hand, freed, lifted until it was just under Rogers' nose, fingers rubbing together in the circular motion that has but one meaning wherever men gather to discuss business.

Cursing inwardly, Rogers produced his wallet. The wallet was crammed full—he had had to beg and borrow in order to accumulate what it contained—but it was almost empty when he had paid Clive his fee.

The detective's eyes had widened at sight of the stuffed wallet, but he made no comment. When he had counted the bills that Rogers had given him and stowed them away in a pocket, he produced a small slip of paper.

"That's where she lives."

"Waterville?" The address scribbled on the paper meant nothing to Rogers.

"It's about two hundred miles north of here." For a moment, Clive hesitated. One did not, in his profession, admit to fear, however tenuous. Still, his fee had been a generous one; it made him feel expansive. "I didn't like the town at all. Peculiar place. Strange. I got out of there as fast as I could. If I were you—"

"You aren't." Rogers had not really heard him. He was staring at the slip of paper and his hands were trembling. "I'm more interested in what we discussed in your office. Nobody knew I hired you?"

"Nobody."

"And nobody saw you come here?"

"Nobody." This time, the detective's voice was almost aggrieved. "I'm good at my job. Everything confidential. That was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Rogers, his back still to the door, seemed satisfied. "Yes, it was." But when he moved away from the door to shake Clive's hand, there was no mistaking his meaning. The meeting was over. "Thanks."

"Any time." Rogers, Clive was thinking, was an odd one. He had hoped to linger, to talk, perhaps to gain some inkling of what Rogers was up to—there was

often profit in such information—but Rogers was obviously anxious to be rid of him. "Well, so long." He had already forgotten Rogers by the time he had placed his hand on the doorknob. He was thinking of other things, of the money that Rogers had given him. It made a comfortable bulge in his pocket, and he was content.

He did not see Rogers, behind him, pluck his necktie from the chest of drawers. He did not see Rogers come after him. The first inkling that he had of what was about to happen was the feather-light touch of the necktie as Rogers looped it about his throat, a touch that was almost instantly transformed into a gagging, choking pressure that constricted his windpipe like a noose, that cut off the flow of air to his lungs, that made his eyes bulge as he fought vainly to claw the necktie from his throat.

In seconds, his tongue was protruding between his writhing lips and his face was blue, but still he fought. He fought as only a man on the threshold of extinction can fight, his body flopping like the body of a hooked fish—and it was hopeless. Rogers, too, was fighting—for something that only he knew about—and he hung on like grim death, every muscle in his body straining, his breath coming in great gasps. Until, presently, Clive's fingers were plucking only weakly at the necktie. Until, at last, his arms fell helplessly to his sides and he hung limply from the noose and then slumped to the floor, collapsing in on himself like a broken marionette, and lay purple-faced and open-mouthed with his bulging eyes glaring sightlessly up at the ceiling.

For a long moment, Rogers stood staring down at him, his own face still distorted with the strain of his effort. It was over. After a while, he smiled. It had really gone quite well. He was pleased and calm when he removed the money from Clive's pocket and returned it to his wallet. So much for that.

The clerk behind the desk in the lobby gave him barely a glance when he left the hotel, and that pleased him, too. In all the time that he had been

registered at the hotel—under a false name, of course —the clerk had seen him only once, on the night when he had checked in. There would be no identifying him when Clive's body was found.

He had, in fact, no further interest in Clive. Clive had served his purpose. Now, there were more important matters to be attended to. A half hour later he was at the bus terminal; minutes after that, he was on his way. It seemed to him, as the bus rolled through the bright afternoon, that its wheels made a kind of song. They seemed to be humming a single word over and over again: "Money. Money, money, money . . ." In time, completely at peace with himself and with his world, completely without conscience or regret, he slept.

It was the bus driver who wakened him. "Waterville, mister." The bus was no longer rolling, by then, and he could see daylight through the window, so that for an instant it seemed to him that he had only just closed his eyes. But the lengthening shadows outside belied the thought. Emotionally exhausted, he had slept away the journey.

"Thanks." Stiffly, he left the bus and stood uncertainly as the engine coughed into life and the bus moved off.

Waterville, whatever its other attributes, was scarcely a booming metropolis. The street on which he stood was deserted, and so still that it might have been the main street of a ghost town. Not a car, not a pedestrian, was visible. And the stores that lined the street, he noted without really thinking about it, were shabby and neglected looking. It was as if the town had reached a certain point in its development and then stopped. Here and there, windows had been replaced by plywood, and the walls of the buildings that he passed as he walked were scabrous with peeling paint.

Despite himself, he shivered. There was an atmosphere about the town, a *feel*, that would have been more appropriate to an ancient cemetery. A sense of decay . . . He shook himself. Not knowing in which

direction to walk, he had walked in the direction in which he had been facing when the bus left, and at the corner, he almost laughed aloud at his luck. The chipped enamel street sign at the corner bore on one of its scarred arms the name of the street that was scribbled on the scrap of paper that Clive had given him. The coincidence boded well for what he had yet to do.

Still, as he walked on, he could not shake off his sense of foreboding. The town was *too* quiet. Nothing, no sign of life, not even a stray dog or cat, gave evidence that it was inhabited.

Perhaps that was why, when he stood at last before the house he sought, he hesitated. He could not have said. The house, as neglected as all the others that he had passed, stood dark and silent in the deepening gloom and for a while he merely stood on the empty street and stared at it. But he had not come this far only to let vague premonitions deter him now. Eventually, he climbed the few brick stairs that led up to the front door and rang the doorbell.

Nothing. No sound, no lights. Nothing.

"Damn. She's not home."

Twice more, petulantly now, he pressed the doorbell and heard it ring somewhere deep inside the house. But no one came. Disgusted, he retraced his steps down the stairs to the pavement. He reeled as he turned to walk back the way he had come and collided violently with a man who had been hurrying along the street. Startled, he let out a small, mewing sound of fear.

"Sorry." The man he had run into was staring at him out of an ugly face. But despite his ugliness, he did not seem threatening.

Embarrassed by his involuntary whimper of fear, Rogers waved a deprecating hand. "No harm done."

"Good." The man almost turned away. But not quite. Something seemed to impel him to stare again at Rogers. "You're a stranger in town, aren't you?"

The tone of the question—tense, fearful—froze the "Yes," in Rogers' throat. "So?"

The man offered no explanation. His head tilted as he looked up at the now almost black sky and then back again at Rogers. "So—it's getting dark. You'd better get inside somewhere."

"Inside?" Rogers did not know that there was a tremor in his voice. "Why—?"

He was speaking to himself. The man was already half a dozen paces away and walking rapidly down the street. At the corner, where an electric sign glared garishly above a store window, he made a turn and vanished.

Rogers, looking after him, swallowed hard. His mouth, for some unaccountable reason, was suddenly dry. He was not aware, when he noticed the sign, that he gasped almost with relief. The sign had been there all the time—it spelled out, simply, RESTAURANT—but now that he was aware of it it was, all at once, a refuge, a haven. All at once, he had had enough of this too-still street with its reaching shadows and its old houses with dark windows that seemed to watch him where he stood. Hurrying, he fled from the shadows and almost burst into the restaurant, so that the two diners who were already there looked up, startled, as he entered.

There were only the two of them, a man and a woman, seated together at one of the small tables and reflected in the floor to ceiling mirror that covered one entire wall of the place. Their eyes, as they turned toward the door, were frightened. Then, as if reassured, they returned to their coffee.

Rogers, after that first meeting of eyes, ignored them. The sudden uneasiness that gripped him on the street seemed laughable here in the light and his lip curled as much with contempt for his own skittishness as for the surroundings in which he found himself. Old-fashioned and drab, with heavy drapes hanging from its papered walls and small lamps perched anachronistically on its cloth-covered tables, the restaurant might have been lifted bodily out of the Victorian era and plunked down here intact. His nostrils twitched with distaste as he surveyed it.

But—any port in a storm. This was as good a place in which to kill time as any other. Completely himself again, he walked to one of the tables and seated himself. And if the chair onto which he dropped was hard, if the outdated water pitcher and goblets on the table beside the ridiculous lamp made his lip curl again, at least there were no shadows here, no mysterious ugly men with frightened eyes.

But there was someone else. Where he had appeared from, or when, Rogers could not guess, but suddenly there was a waiter standing beside him. A waiter who looked to be at least seventy, who wore a dingy white apron tied about his scrawny middle and who looked down at him without expression out of watery blue eyes that were not frightened but only cold.

It was an effort for Rogers to keep a quiver from his voice. The waiter's sudden appearance was disconcerting, to say the least, but he managed, "I—I'd like a menu, please."

The watery blue eyes did not flicker. "I'm sorry, sir, but we're just about ready to close."

"Close?" Rogers' own eyes, when he glanced at his wristwatch, left no doubt of his annoyance. "But it's almost dinner time. You can't close just before—"

"It's getting dark." The old man said it matter of factly, without emphasis, but his tone was final. "We always close before dark. Our help won't stay after sundown."

"But—"

"They have to be home before it gets dark." Again, the old man's tone was matter of fact. And yet in that very matter of factness there was something that made the hackles rise on the back of Rogers' neck. It was as if the words were spoken by rote, as if he were being told something that he should already know.

"Pardon me." The waiter had noticed that the other diners had finished and were waiting for their check. When they had paid it and the old man had pocketed their tip and helped them into their coats, their haste to leave was obvious.

Rogers' mouth was dry again. He did not wait for the waiter to return to him. Instead, he went to the door, where the old man waited expectantly. Clearly, he was expected to leave, too.

"All right," he said harshly, "what the devil is this all about? Why is everyone here so afraid of the dark?"

"Why?" The waiter might have been an adult speaking to a child. "They come out at night. Everyone knows that." Not looking back, he moved away, toward the drapes at the rear of the restaurant.

"Who? Who comes out?"

The drapes parted as the waiter passed between them, fluttered, and fell back into place. Left alone, Rogers refrained from following only by a conscious effort of will. He was angry, infuriated by what he considered to be the old man's rudeness, but following would have served no useful purpose. And there was, too, his apprehension. At the core of his anger, there was still the seed of that apprehension—a seed that had taken root in him almost as soon as he had left the bus and that had been growing ever since. His anger took him almost to the drapes behind which the old man had vanished; there, his apprehension stopped him. To blazes with the old man. He had other fish to fry. Muttering, he left the restaurant.

On the street, he was momentarily disoriented, and stopped to take his bearings. Darkness had set in in earnest, and except for the ragged pool of light cast by the restaurant's electric sign, the blackness was absolute. No overhead lights illuminated the facades of the silent houses that he had passed on his way to the restaurant, and the street was as empty of traffic as before. Only the electric sign made an island of brightness in a world of shadows and suddenly, that too was gone as the sign went dark.

Blind, he could only stand where he was until his eyes had accustomed themselves to the night. Then, purposefully, he set off down the street. He had already wasted too much time. Straining to pierce the blackness, he sought for and found again the brick

stairs at the foot of which he had had such a fright. He took them two at a time and a moment later was fumbling along the doorjamb for the bell. When he had located it, he pressed it hard and did not take his finger from the button.

There had been no lights on in the house as he approached, and none went on as the bell sounded again somewhere inside, but eventually his ringing brought results. He could hear a woman's footsteps; just behind the door, the footsteps came to a halt.

"Who's there?" The voice that sounded through the door was nervous, afraid. A girl's voice.

Rogers' smile, in the darkness, made him look more than ever like a ferret. "It's me, Harold. Your brother."

"Harold?" Incredulity tinged the voice now, and his smile congealed.

"That's right, Donna, Harold. Remember?" The last word was said acidly. He and Donna had never been close—far from it—but even so, her incredulity stung.

Slowly, the door opened. An inch or so, no more.

"Come in! Quickly!"

When he moved forward, the door opened wider, but only enough so that he could slide through into the hall beyond. Whatever the web of fear that had enmeshed the people of Waterville, it had not spared Donna, and when he was inside she did not at once speak to him. Instead, she closed the door hurriedly behind him and slammed home the sliding bolt that had been attached to its inner side. Only then, still silent, did she lead the way to the living room, and only then did she switch on a lamp.

By its light, Rogers surveyed her with ill-concealed amazement. Donna had never been vivacious. He had, in fact, always considered her to be dull. As a child, she had been solitary and withdrawn, only rarely joining in play with her peers and even more rarely given to laughter, but she had been rather attractive. That attractiveness was no more. Something about her, he could not quite put his finger on it, was different. She was afraid, that was obvious, but there was more to

it than that. There was a grayness about her, a lack of spark. As if she had permitted her fear to make her old before her time.

Aware of his inspection, she endured it and then said, "So you found me at last."

The remark was prosaic, pointless, but it was just about what he had expected from her. He smiled into her eyes and found them as he had always found them. Lusterless, almost stupid.

"It took a long time." His stare took in the room —drab, worn. Trust Donna to wind up in a place like this. She had no flair, no zest for living. Small wonder that they had never been close.

"What do you want?"

That, too, was like her. No finesse, no circumspection. Stupid.

"I just wanted to see you. After all, you are my sister."

Again, his eyes flicked about the room. Now that he was here he was in no great hurry, and he was curious even if she was not. "Why did you bury yourself away in a place like this? And why all the precautions? Why is everyone afraid of the dark here?"

It seemed to him that she might faint. Her fear, whatever had caused it, was real. That much was certain. "Because of—them," she said, and it was a whisper.

"Them?"

He asked the question tolerantly, amused. But her reply wiped the amusement from his face.

"The vampires," Donna said. "They come out at night."

"Vampires?" The word fell from his open mouth like a stone. "You're not serious." In a moment, Donna would smile, reveal the joke. "How can anyone in his right mind believe—"

She did not smile. Her voice was flat, matter of fact. As the old waiter's voice had been flat and matter of fact. "There have been seventeen cases so far. All of them happened in or near the town. Seventeen

bodies found with every drop of blood drained out of them."

"I don't believe it! You're making it up!" It had to be a joke! He fastened on that thought, clung to it, and accepted it. To do anything else would have been insanity.

"Believe what you like." Donna's eyes, those lackluster, stupid eyes, had widened as she spoke. It was as though she were seeing horrors that he could not even imagine. But she did not press the point. "I've told you the truth. Now, suppose you tell me why you were so anxious to find me. Why are you really here?"

"Why not? You're my sister—"

No, that would not do. Not even she would believe that he had come out of family affection. And there was really no reason for pretense. He took a deep breath.

"Father died four weeks ago."

That should have brought a response. He waited. But whatever the terror that gripped Donna, it seemed to have drained her. Beyond a slight tightening of her lips she showed no emotion.

"I've been looking for you ever since. You were his heir, you know." Rogers paused, and when he went on there was in his voice a tinge of faintly remembered, long-ago bitterness. "You always were his favorite. He didn't care for me at all."

"Should he have?"

"No. No, I suppose not." Other memories were crowding in on him. Memories of his own inadequacy, of his father's disappointment in him. Memories that made him squirm. He put the memories out of his mind, relegating the past again to oblivion.

"Anyway, he left everything to you." Suddenly, his tone was vicious. Donna was backing away from him. "Everything! It's all yours! But only," his hand dipped into his coat pocket, "for as long—as you live." The last word was slightly accented, just a touch, but there was no mistaking his meaning.

"No, you—you wouldn't," Donna said, and backed away still further as his hand reappeared. In the hand there was a wicked-looking switchblade. "You wouldn't," she whispered again, and remained rooted, fascinated.

"Wouldn't I?" The click of the blade as it snapped into view made a counterpoint to his words. Long and deadly, the blade was a serpent's tongue, reaching for her.

Had she screamed then, had she pleaded, he might at least have hesitated. But she did not scream, she did not plead. Her tongue seemed paralyzed and only her eyes moved, darting wildly, and it was her eyes that galvanized him. Those dull, stupid eyes that he had always found so irritating, that triggered in him all of his old resentments, all of the petty jealousies of his childhood. "Wouldn't I? Not even for money? Oh, but you're wrong, Donna," he said—and lunged.

She did scream, then. She screamed a high-pitched, keening scream that tore at his eardrums as he leaped forward, a scream that echoed from the walls, sounded from the ceiling and died as he drove the knife into her breast and twisted it. For a moment, they made a frozen tableau; then, a moment after that, she sagged limply.

But even then, Rogers did not release his grip on the knife. He had to be sure, and so he held on, forcing the blade deeper and still deeper. When she fell, he fell with her and was hardly aware that he did so.

How long he lay there, he could not have said. Donna's scream had unnerved him and for a time they made a grisly tangle of arms and legs on the cold floor—the living and the dead. Then, gradually, he regained control of himself. When he stood up, he left the knife protruding from Donna's breast. Its bone handle glinted dully in the glow of the lamp.

Innately cold and unfeeling, he could even, after a while, smile the same small, satisfied smile that he had smiled after killing Clive. Sister or stranger, it

mattered little, really. What mattered was success. In this world, the strong fed on the weak, the clever on the stupid and the devil take the hindmost. His ferret's eyes were glittering as he left the house. A few more hours and he would be back in the city, and no one the wiser.

But there were still those hours. A glance at his watch—he had to bring the watch close to his eyes in order to make out its hands—showed him that it would be another forty-five minutes before he could expect the next city-bound bus.

He would have to wait somewhere. But where? At the foot of the brick stairs he hesitated, uncertain as to what direction to take and then stared in surprise. Far down the street, at the corner, there was the same ragged pool of light that had been there before. The restaurant sign had been turned back on and by its glow he could see three couples as they approached the restaurant and vanished inside.

A few moments later, curious, he stood outside the restaurant and then, with a shrug, moved toward the door. Why not? He was hungry, and there was still that forty-five minutes. There was little risk involved. Donna—he smiled again, and this time his smile was a smirk—Donna was hardly in a position to give an alarm. The smirk still twitched at his lips when he threw open the door and, just inside paused again, amazed.

The restaurant, except for one or two tables that were not in use, was packed, alive with the muted sounds of conversation and laughter. Except for the old-fashioned look of the place he might have been back in the city, in a fine eating place where well-dressed men and women ate and sipped their red wine and conversed in soft tones. Someone had even drawn the drapes across the mirrored wall, so that the restaurant seemed smaller, more intimate.

Delighted, he went to one of the empty tables and seated himself, his mouth watering as the savory aromas of steaming soup and roasts assailed his nostrils.

He had not, he remembered, eaten since morning, and he was famished. Eagerly, he sought for a waiter and spied one at another table.

"Waiter?"

"In a moment, sir." The waiter was not the old man whom he had seen earlier; this one was younger, taller, but his tone was as punctiliously polite as the old man's had been.

Satisfied, Rogers settled himself to wait, smiling again as he recalled what Donna had told him. Vampires? Ridiculous. And yet there *was* something about this town, even about the people who surrounded him . . . Of course! The people!

Suddenly, he was frowning. The restaurant was old-fashioned but so were the people! Well-dressed and well-behaved as they were, there was still a—a wrongness about them, a variation from the norm . . .

Their clothing. That was it! Here and there he could see a woman's hairdo that was forty years behind the times! And their costumes—he could just vaguely remember when women had worn long coats with fur collars, when men had worn ridiculously wide-shouldered, double-breasted jackets and pleated trousers. But that had been long ago, when he was still a boy! When—

"Good evening, sir."

The waiter to whom he had called had come to his table, and the waiter's appearance, too, was a shock. Gaunt and tight-lipped, he seemed almost sinister . . .

Sinister? Rogers shook himself. He was letting his imagination run away with him. Damn Donna and her talk of vampires! A town like this, out of the mainstream—of course it was behind the times! There were probably a hundred more like it tucked away in out of the way corners all across the country and each with its own particular brand of superstition to add a bit of spice to living.

"Good evening."

The waiter, he noticed, carried a menu. But the menu was not offered to him.

"The table d'hote is very nice, sir," the waiter said. "Juice, soup, roast, dessert, coffee."

Almost, Rogers responded tartly. Waiters, in his experience, made at least a pretense of offering a choice. But it was really too much to expect decent service in a place like this.

Ah, well. "Sounds fine."

"Yes, sir." The waiter moved off, vanished between the drapes, and with his going Rogers turned again to his examination of the other diners. They *were* strange. Almost ludicrous, really. It was as if they, like the restaurant, had been plucked out of another time. Intent on their food and on each other, they seemed blissfully unaware that they looked like dusty antiques, that the world had moved on. Bah! They were all fools, like Donna. Only fools would choose to live in a backwater like—

A footstep beside him made Rogers look up. The waiter had returned with a small glass on a fluted silver tray.

"Ah! Tomato juice."

"Sir?" The waiter was staring at him curiously.

Rogers ignored him. Whatever the reason for the waiter's curiosity, it was undoubtedly as inane and meaningless as everything else that he had heard in this Godforsaken little village. Hungry, he sipped his juice. It was peculiarly flavored and too thick, almost cloying, but he drank it down.

"Your soup, sir."

Somehow, in the few moments that it took Rogers to finish his juice, the waiter had been to the kitchen and back. The tray that he carried now was bigger than the one that he had carried previously, and on it there sat a large, steaming soup tureen. Handling it with the ease of long practice, he set the tureen on the table and deftly filled Rogers' dish.

"I hope you enjoy it, sir."

After the cloying juice, Rogers doubted he would enjoy it. The peculiar flavor of the juice still clung to his palate. Nevertheless, the soup did smell delicious, and he could see out of the corner of one

eye that a number of the other diners were consuming the same steaming dish with considerable gusto.

He brought a spoonful of the liquid to his mouth. Its taste belied the promise of its aroma. "Somewhat salty, isn't it?" he asked.

He had not really expected an answer, but neither was he prepared for the curiosity that immediately reappeared in the waiter's eyes. For some reason that he could not fathom the curiosity made him uneasy, so that he lifted another spoonful of the soup to his lips, anxious to hide the uneasiness.

But the soup really was impossible. It had, like the juice, a peculiar flavor and he would be double damned if he would be bullied by a waiter, sinister looking or not.

"Tastes rather strange," he said.

"It's our regular, sir."

"Indeed?" Irritation tinged Rogers' voice. "I think I'll do without soup," he said, and waited for the waiter to comment, to protest.

There was no comment, no protest. Just a lifting of the eyebrows. "Yes, sir." From somewhere about himself the waiter produced a pencil and a pad. "And now, how would you like your roast clots? Well-done, medium, rare?"

Rogers' head came up slowly. It seemed to him, just for a moment, that the waiter had said, "clots."

"Roast—what?"

"Clots. Blood clots." There was no mistaking the curiosity in the waiter's eyes, now. It was in plain sight. Curiosity, and something else. Suspicion.

But Rogers saw neither the curiosity nor the suspicion. Bitter liquid rose in his throat and he gagged, spewing the liquid back into his dish. Sick, he had to try to rise from his seat. He had to get away, to get outside, to vomit . . .

The waiter's hand was on his shoulder. His bony fingers held Rogers with an iron grip that he would not have thought possible in a man so gaunt and forced him back into his chair.

"Draw the curtains! An intruder!"

The waiter's voice came to him above the sound of his own retching. But changed, metallic. At the sound of it, all conversation ceased; the sudden silence that filled the room was the silence of the tomb. For a single impossible moment the silence pressed against Rogers' eardrums. Then, moving swiftly and yet without hurry, several of the diners left their tables. In seconds, the drapes that had hidden the mirrored wall had been drawn back along their rollers to cover the restaurant's windows, and thick folds of cloth barred any visual contact with the outside world.

So quickly had it all happened, so suddenly, that Rogers had remained frozen, still gagging. Only the pain in his shoulder released him, finally, from his sick trance. It required all of his strength, but somehow he managed to stand up. Twisting and squirming, he wrenched free of the waiter's grip and stood so, at bay, not yet quite certain what was taking place.

He was not to be left long in doubt. His squirming, when he stood erect at last, had turned him about so that he faced the huge floor-to-ceiling mirror. He could see his own reflection, even marvel for a single heartstopping instant at the way his face had contorted with fear—and then the real horror washed over him.

He could see his own reflection. *But not the reflections of the others.* The mirrored images of the chairs and of the tables at which the others had been seated were all clearly visible. But nothing else! Except for himself, the restaurant, at least in the mirror, was empty!

It wasn't happening! It was a nightmare! The realization that had begun to ring alarm bells in his shocked mind could not be true! But there was only one way to make certain. Trembling, dreading what he would see, he turned.

And they were all there. The waiter, the other diners, all of them. They stood in a solid phalanx between him and the door. And even as he stared, even

as the horror became a solid, palpable thing inside him, the phalanx parted and a woman pushed her way toward him through the crowd.

"Donna?" His lips formed the word, but no sound came out. Not yet.

That was to come a moment later, when Donna stopped before him. She held up the switchblade that he had left implanted in her breast, and tossed it contemptuously aside. She opened her mouth to smile, he saw her long, needle-sharp fangs. He gaped stupidly at the others and they, too, opened their mouths to reveal their fangs. The scream that burst from his lips then was a gasping, ululating howl of pure terror. But who was there to hear? The scream faded, became only a mumbling gurgle as the crowd swept toward him and seized him and lifted him high overhead.

It was at that moment, mercifully, that he fainted. So he was not aware, a few moments later, when the restaurant took on a festive air and filled wineglasses were passed out among the crowd and the man nearest him lifted a glass to his lips and sipped appreciatively and said, "Delicious! Nothing like the real stuff! Nice and fresh! Excellent!"

He did not even see Donna when she too extended a hand and said, "I'll have a glass too, please."

He regained consciousness only when she had almost finished her drink, and then he did not at once understand. In the little time that he had been unconscious, the world had turned topsy-turvy. He could see Donna as if through a veil. It was Donna, there was no doubt of that, but she was inverted, upside-down, and his dazed brain could not fathom why.

Not until he saw his image reflected in the mirror. It was not Donna who was inverted, it was he. He hung head down in the middle of the room, suspended from a rafter, with a wooden beer tap inserted deep into a gash in his throat, and when he could tear his tortured stare away from the mirror he could make out the man standing beside him and refilling Donna's glass from the tap.

Had he been able to scream again then, his scream would have been the scream of a man on the edge of madness. But one does not scream with a beer barrel tap inserted deep into one's jugular vein. So, at the end, just before oblivion took him, he could only look silently into Donna's inverted eyes and plead with his own. It was hopeless, of course. But still, he tried. Because of that, her eyes were the very last thing that he saw. It was strange, but even upside-down and inverted, Donna's eyes were no longer stupid. They were not stupid at all. They were sparkling, glittering, as she drank his blood.

And then she was laughing, laughing, laughing . . .

3

The silence that filled the room when Rogers had finished his narrative was not like the silence that had permeated the building earlier. It was different, even more profound, as if each of the occupants of the room were locked away in some secret world of his own. Their drinks forgotten, they sat as if mesmerized, not moving.

Of them all, only the artist seemed inclined to say anything. His paint-stained fingers clasping and unclasping about his glass, he leaned toward Rogers and spoke softly.

"A recurrent dream?"

Rogers, before he answered, downed his drink and poured himself another with hands that were suddenly trembling.

"It's more than a dream. Much more." For a moment he seemed reluctant to go on. But there was no derision in the eyes of the others. They too were leaning toward him. Like sleepwalkers coming awake. "It's hard to explain. It seems to be with me all the time. Almost, almost as if—"

"And *do* you have a sister?" Critchit, no longer bemused by his own thoughts, came directly to the point.

"No!"

Rogers' reply had been just a shade too vehement, too emphatic.

"Then—?"

"I think I know what he means." The tall man, almost as seedy as Rogers, spoke half to himself.

"Really." Critchit's voice dripped with uncalled-for sarcasm. "Do tell us."

"Tell you?" The tall man's eyes, narrowed, became shadowed. As if he, too, was remembering. "Well, why not? I have a similar vision, a similar—fear. Similar, but not quite. Not quite . . ."

4

"It's a sure-fire plan!"

Maitland could scarcely contain himself. Everything around him—the stale odors of boarding-house cooking, the threadbare carpet, the battered typewriter sitting on a scarred table—reminded him of the failure that had dogged his footsteps all his life. But as he spoke those things seemed to fade away, so that he could see himself in a lavish suite, surrounded by every conceivable luxury. Almost self-hypnotized, he stared at Alex out of glowing eyes. "We can't miss!"

"Can't we?"

Alex did not echo his eagerness. Until this moment he had listened in silence, and he was impressed. But he had known Maitland too long and too well to rush blindly into one of Maitland's schemes. Maitland was a writer, with a writer's vivid imagination, and they had shared other moments like this, other dreams of fast cars and fine clothes that had caught Maitland up in a whirl of enthusiasm and then dropped him back to earth, still a failure.

"No, it can't!" Maitland, his eyes no longer glowing, still spoke emphatically. Everything depended upon Alex. Everything! How ironic it would be if

Alex turned him down now. Alex was a selfish, self-centered fool—

But that kind of thinking would not implement the plan that he had worked on for so long and that was now so close to fruition. And the plan had to be implemented. He had had enough of cheap boarding houses that reeked of grease and that were filled with tenants with whom he shared no common ground and in whom he had no interest whatsoever. At least he and Alex shared a mutual yearning for the easy life that neither of them would ever attain by their own meager talents.

"I'll go over it once more," he said, and held up the little bottle of clear liquid that he had taken from the dresser. "This will cut down my pulse and heartbeat, my entire matabolism, so that even the best doctor in the country will think I'm dead."

From the dresser he picked up another bottle. A brown one, this time. "These are heart pills that I'd be taking if I had a heart condition, so that it will look as if I'd had an attack."

Alex was frowning, concentrating. The spark of cupidity that flickered in his face and that Maitland knew so well was encouraging. Alex would cooperate; he was certain of it. Why not? Neither of them had ever before been troubled by conscience.

"Your job will be to see to it that I'm buried the day after I 'die'. There'll be enough air in the casket to last me a while. Then all you have to do is wait until night, dig me up, hide me until you collect the insurance money—and we're off and away."

There, that was it. The whole beautifully simple plan. It was grisly, yes—Maitland glanced at his typewriter and shrugged mentally—but he was accustomed to dealing with the macabre. The reality could not be much worse than what he had written about so often.

"It would make a great story, but I'd be lucky to get fifty pounds for it. There's no money in horror. This way—"

"And there's no way the insurance people can catch on?" Alex's shrewd little eyes were glowing just as Maitland's had glowed. But he was still cautious.

"I've thought it all out. Nothing can possibly go wrong." Maitland set the bottles back in their places. "Well?"

When he turned back to Alex, Alex was nodding. "All right. It sounds good. When do you do it?"

"Tonight." Was that a sly, secretive look that had crossed Alex's face? Well, if it was, no matter. Maitland did not ponder the question. If anything, he found the idea amusing. He had his own secrets. "Agreed?"

"Agreed."

There was nothing more to be discussed. Maitland led the way to the door. "See you soon."

Alex hesitated, but only for a moment. "See you soon." Not saying more, he walked down the stairs to the street door and disappeared.

He did not see the sudden smile that appeared on Maitland's face just before he went back into his room. The smile was cold, vicious, and it remained on Maitland's face when he closed the door behind him and then crossed to the dresser and pulled open a drawer.

In one corner of the drawer there was a stack of shirts, and under the shirts there was a gun. Still smiling, he checked the bullets in the gun's magazine, then stood for a long moment staring at himself in the mirror.

"And after you collect the insurance, friend Alex," he said softly, "I won't need you any more."

Chuckling, he pointed the gun at his reflection in the mirror and pretended to pull the trigger. "Boom!"

Not ten feet away, on the other side of the wall on which the mirror hung, the sound of his "Boom!" was echoed by the sharp sound of a book being slammed shut. The book, a medical tome filled with anatomical drawings and photographs, was a massive one and the sound it made was very like a pistol

shot, so that even the young man who had slammed it shut was startled.

"Sorry."

Across the room from him, his roommate grinned sympathetically. They had been rooming together for three semesters and the roommate, his name was Jerry, understood him perfectly. He, too, had been studying, and he too had reached that point which every medical student reaches at one time or another in the course of his education, a point at which he despairs of ever absorbing all that he is required to absorb.

"Trouble, Tom?"

"Trouble!" The young face opposite him, the tone, implied that the word was the very peak of inadequacy. "I'll never learn it. I'll never pass the anatomy course. Not in a million years."

Jerry's nod mirrored his complete understanding. "I know how you feel. Trouble is, we can only work in the dissection room for the short periods we're assigned to it."

That, they were both agreed upon. Resigned, they returned to their books. But it was only Jerry who made a real effort. In time, after he had stared for a while at the text before him without really seeing it, Tom spoke again.

"If we could only have a body of our own—"

Jerry's quizzical look caught him up short.

"I mean, to work on when we want to."

"Great idea." Jerry grinned at him anew. "What do we do, go out and kill somebody?"

Tom was shaking his head. "No, I'm serious."

"You're crazy." Shaking his head in turn, Jerry returned again to his book. But not for long. Presently, his chin came up.

"Where would we put it?"

Tom, concentrating, did not at first comprehend. "What?"

"What you were just talking about. A body. Where would we put it? If we had one, that is?"

Not smiling, Tom let his eyes roam about the room. "There." His eyes had come to rest on the wardrobe closet that contained their few articles of clothing. When he had opened the door and shoved the clothing to one side, there was a large empty space at the rear of the closet.

"There's only one key—and we have it."

"And suppose our landlady finds it?"

"She never comes in here. We clean up ourselves. No one would ever know."

Somehow, unaccountably, the conversation had become deadly serious. But neither of them had become aware that they had lowered their voices, that they spoke in hushed tones, like conspirators.

"All right—so we have a place to keep a body. But where would *we* get a body?"

The question, inevitable as it was, took both of them a little by surprise, brought them back to reality. Just for a moment they had shared something new, learned something new about each other, and their new-found knowledge was oddly disquieting. But it had, too, somehow brought them closer together.

"That," Tom said, "is the problem," and plopped himself on his bed—again the typically careless university student—so that the bedsprings groaned protestingly.

Maitland, in his own room, heard the groan, but only subconsciously. His mind was on other things. He was staring at the bottles on the dresser and at the hypodermic needle that lay beside them, and his face was pale. What lay ahead of him would not be pleasant. It might even be deadly. But he had long ago made up his mind to what he was about to do. Presently, he took up the little bottle of clear liquid and the hypodermic and filled the hypodermic from the bottle. That done, he rolled up his shirtsleeve.

The sudden small, sharp pain when the needle entered his vein made him gasp, but his pressure on the plunger of the needle remained steady. Fasci-

nated, he watched as the liquid in the hypodermic's plastic tube disappeared into his bloodstream.

He had rehearsed this moment in his head a hundred times, and what he did then, he did by rote. The needle and the bottle of clear liquid were rolled up in a bit of cloth, stowed with his gun under the shirts in the drawer. Now, close the drawer . . .

He was already beginning to see things only hazily. But there was something else to be done . . .

His shirtsleeve. It was still rolled up. Fumbling a little, he rolled the sleeve down, buttoned it.

The room was wavering, going dark. He had not thought that the injection would work so quickly. Staggering, he crossed to the bed and stretched himself upon it. A last little smile crossed his face just before the darkness took him completely. Someone, whoever first came to his door in the morning, was in for a most unpleasant shock.

The someone was Mrs. Carter. Mrs. Carter owned the boarding house and she was a woman of long-established habits. In the morning, she rose early and prepared breakfast for her roomers as always, and, as always, was at the front door promptly at eight, just as the mail was pushed through the mail slot in the door. Sorting the mail as she went, she walked upstairs and knocked at the first door on the landing above. The door was Maitland's.

"Mail, Mr. Maitland."

Maitland, ordinarily, was not one to miss breakfast by sleeping late. But on this occasion, no sound of stirring came from behind the door.

"Mr. Maitland?"

Curious as only boarding house landladies can be curious, Mrs. Carter tried the knob and found the door open. It swung wide at her touch. And, she noted disapprovingly, the lights were still on in Maitland's room even though bright sunlight streamed through the window. She would have something to say to him about that . . .

Whatever it was that she might have said, how-

ever, was to remain unsaid. What burst from her lips was, instead, a shrill, frightened scream that echoed through the hall and penetrated into every room on the floor.

Maitland lay fully clothed on the bed, his eyes wide and staring. But he was not lying entirely on the bed. He was on his back, arms outflung, and his head dangled limply over the edge of the bed so that she saw his slack open mouth and his staring eyes at a crazy angle. Finding him dead would have been enough in itself to send her into hysterics; finding him as she did made her first scream only a prelude. Shriek after shriek escaped her before she was able to control herself and to clamp her trembling lips shut.

She was leaning weakly against the doorjamb of Maitland's room, gray faced and unable to speak, when Tom and Jerry burst into the hall from their own room and ran to her side.

"Mrs. Carter! What is it?"

For answer, Mrs. Carter's mouth opened and closed silently. She was crying with the aftermath of her first shock and her tongue would not obey her. But there was really no need for her to speak. The slack body on the bed spoke for itself.

Tom drew in his breath sharply. He and Jerry were only half dressed—they had talked through most of the night—but the sight of Maitland was enough to drive the lingering sleepiness from their eyes and to make them look at each other significantly.

Mrs. Carter would not have understood the look even if she had seen it and she did not see it. As she pointed, the wall telephone down the hall had begun to ring. Instinctively, she moved toward it, only minimally aware that the rest of her tenants were emerging from their rooms in variouus stages of undress and asking excited questions. Ever the landlady, she picked the telephone receiver from its hook without really thinking about it.

"Yes?"

The voice that answered her was Alex's, but she

did not know that. Her thoughts were all for Maitland. A death in a boarding house was always a bad thing; most people disliked living in a house where a man had recently died. Preoccupied, she hardly heard Alex when he spoke.

"May I speak to Mr. Maitland, please."

"Maitland?" Mrs. Carter shook herself a little, brushing away at least a few of the cobwebs that clogged her mind. A new thought had arrived to plague her: to the best of her knowledge, Maitland had no family, no one to take care of whatever had to be done. There would be arrangements to be made, bills to be paid—

"Are you a friend of his?"

"Yes."

"A good friend?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Carter could breathe freely again. Perhaps, after all, Maitland's death would not be the complete disaster she had envisioned. "I think you'd better come over."

At the other end of the line, Alex smiled. "Right away."

He was not smiling afterward, however. Afterward, as he stood with his back to the dresser in Maitland's room and watched the doctor, his face was carefully composed to register precisely the correct degree of grief. And if there was a hint of sardonic amusement in his eyes as the doctor went about his examination, the doctor did not notice.

The doctor was quite thorough. He had composed Maitland's body decently on the bed and he was listening through a stethoscope for any lingering heartbeat. When he found none, he let the stethoscope dangle loosely from his neck and turned up Maitland's eyelids. The irises that looked unseeingly up at him were blank, lifeless.

Very slowly, as the doctor bent closer to direct the beam from a tiny flashlight into those vacant eyes, Alex pulled open the dresser drawer that was just

behind him. Groping, he found the rolled up bundle that Maitland had concealed there and transferred it to the pocket of his coat.

"You say he had a heart condition?" The doctor had evidently concluded his examination; he had removed the stethoscope from around his neck and was returning it to his medical kit.

"Yes."

Alex's hand, still in his pocket, was sweating. But there was no hint of suspicion in the doctor's voice. He had seen nothing. Almost casually, the doctor reached out to close Maitland's eyes.

"Was he taking anything for it?"

"I think so." Careful, now. It would not do to seem anxious for the doctor to find the little brown bottle. "There were pills he used to take. They must be around here somewhere—"

"Ah, yes, there they are." The doctor had walked toward him and was reaching behind him to take something from the top of the dresser. "Digoxin. I rather thought so."

The bottle made a tiny clinking noise when he returned it to the dresser. "I'll make out the death certificate. When do you want to bury him?"

"Bury him?" It had all been almost too easy; the question so perfectly suited to Maitland's plans, made Alex stutter and stammer despite himself. "Why, I —he was a lonely man. Had no friends other than me, really. I—I suppose we may as well do it tomorrow."

"Good enough." The doctor, anxious to get on with his calls, was already writing. So he, like Mrs. Carter, did not see Alex's smile. Alex's momentary nervousness was gone and he was thinking of tomorrow, of the funeral. Maitland had planned well. It was a pity that Maitland would never know *how* well.

Maitland, had *he* seen the smile, would have understood at once. Knowing Alex, it would have required no great effort for him to comprehend what

lay behind it. But Maitland knew nothing. Maitland lay in the cheap coffin that Alex had selected, a day later, and was aware neither of the cold wind that knifed between the poorly joined boards of the casket or of the motion when the casket was lifted onto the mechanism that would lower it into the grave.

It was a good day for a funeral, chilly but brightly sunlit, with just a few wisps of clouds scudding across a blue sky. And the cemetery, at such moments usually noisy with the din of weeping, was quiet. Maitland's mourners were few—just Alex, Mrs. Carter, Tom, and Jerry—and none of them had reason to be overcome by grief. Only Mrs. Carter, being a female and naturally sentimental, added her voice to the vicar's as the vicar read the funeral service. "Poor man."

"Dust to dust . . ."

The lowering mechanism creaked as the gravediggers released its cogs and wheels. There were two gravediggers, one fairly young and the other middle-aged and thick-bodied and with a perpetual simple half-smile on his face, and they were unfeelingly efficient. Mrs. Carter, overwhelmed by the solemnity of it all, again breathed, "poor man," and dabbed at her dry eyes.

Alex, beside her, had difficulty in suppressing another grin, but he managed. He was even able to look properly sad as the coffin vanished into its cavity and the others turned away to give him a last moment alone with his friend.

They would have been quite startled had they looked back or heard his chuckle when he looked down into the grave before coming after them. After all, a man who has just buried a friend does not usually whisper, "So long—sucker!"

Having said the words, however, Alex was again able to look quite sad when he continued on. Like the rest, he did not look back to where the two laborers had begun to fill in the grave.

And so there was something that *he* missed. Behind him, the brutish, thick-bodied gravedigger had

stopped his shoveling for a moment and was staring after the departing mourners, and as if his stare were a signal, Tom and Jerry had turned. When their eyes met, all three nodded slightly, as though confirming something of which only they were aware. Before they turned away again, the gravedigger's left eyelid dropped in a broad wink.

Not even Alex was aware of the byplay. Alex, an hour later, was seated in an office, and the man opposite him was speaking in the tone that is reserved for the friends and relatives of one newly deceased. The man was an insurance inspector and when he had finished his examination of the documents that lay before him, his voice was businesslike but kind.

"Mr. Maitland's insurance policy was fully paid up, his death certificate is in order, and you're the beneficiary. I see no reason why we can't send you the proceeds of the policy within a week or so."

He was unaware of Alex's relieved sigh. "Thanks. I wouldn't have troubled you so soon after George's death, but I have to go abroad on business." Alex's hands were sweating again. As with the doctor, it had seemed to him just for a moment that there were questions in the man's eyes.

But as with the doctor, it had been only his imagination. The inspector, if anything, was quite sympathetic. "I understand. I'll take care of it as quickly as I can. And may I offer my sincere regrets."

"Thank you."

"Well, you'll be hearing from us." The interview was over. Alex's chuckle, this time, was silent. Only when he was almost at the door did a cold chill race down his spine.

The inspector's voice froze him in his tracks. "By the way—"

"Yes?"

The inspector was staring at him steadily, and panic rose in his throat, choking him.

"Are *you* insured?"

The relief that flooded over him weakened his

knees. But his shrug revealed nothing of the sudden turmoil inside him that had made his heart take to thudding like a triphammer.

"I'd have no one to leave it to." His legs had regained their strength. "Besides, I'm lucky. I expect to live for a long, long time."

The rest was said to himself. "And to live well, thanks to George!"

He was almost laughing when he closed the office door behind him. Poor old George. All alone in that dismal cemetery. Waiting. What a shame!

Except, of course, that poor old George was not alone. Poor old George lay very still in his coffin and knew nothing of the countless corpses that kept him company on all sides, or of the cold sunlight that played across his newly dug grave and presently gave way to even colder darkness. So how could he be aware, after a time, of the two shadowy figures that entered the cemetery and stole through the gravestones toward where he lay buried? How could he know that Tom and Jerry, their young eyes tense and apprehensive, had returned?

They were almost at the grave when they saw the face. It leaped up suddenly from behind a gravestone, thick-lipped and beetle-browed, and in the gloom it might have been the face of the devil himself. They were shaking with fright before they recognized it.

"You!"

The face came closer, resolved itself into the unlovely face and form of the gravedigger who had winked at them. He was carrying a spade and an iron crowbar.

"Sorry I gave you a fright."

"Sorry! You scared us half to death! When we couldn't find you, we thought you'd backed out."

"Me?" The gravedigger's grin was stupid, but tinged with eagerness. "I've been here for half an hour. You got the money?"

"After we get the body." Tom had been the first

to recover. Trembling though he was, he made his voice firm. But it required an effort. The gravedigger, in the sickly moonlight, was not an appetizing sight.

When he had considered, the man nodded. "Right." Together, the three of them continued the walk toward Maitland's grave. "You two live in the same house with the deceased?"

"Yes."

"So?" A few more steps and they were at the pile of fresh earth that marked their destination. "What d'you want his body for?"

Jerry, frightened but irrepressible, could not resist. "We're ghouls."

The words, if they conveyed anything to the gravedigger, did not register in his dull eyes. When he had stared at them for a few moments, he turned away and began to dig. The sound of his spade as it scraped against a stone sounded like chalk squeaking on a blackboard . . .

. . . or like the squeal that Alex's bureau drawer made as he pulled it open and frowned angrily.

Damn! The drawer made the same nerve-rasping noise each time he opened it. He would have to buy some of that stuff that was supposed to make drawers slide easily—

But he had forgotten. There was no need to ease the drawer. He would not be back. Humming, he began to take things from the drawer and to pack them into the large suitcase that lay open on his bed.

By then, the gravedigger had already removed a foot-thick layer of earth from Maitland's grave. Working contentedly, and seemingly unaware and unafraid of where he was and of what he was doing, he dug quickly until he was standing waist deep in the miniature chasm that he had created. It was because of that, when he turned to throw another spadeful of earth from the grave, that he did not notice that Tom and Jerry had come closer, the better

to watch him. His first intimation that they had done so came when he heard Tom's whispered gasp.

"Hey!"

"Huh?" Puzzled, he looked up then. And grinned vacuously.

The spadeful of earth had struck Tom full in the face and he was sputtering, choking on the black grains.

"Throw it *that* way!" Tom's whisper, this time, was a hiss. A sweep of his hand indicated where the gravedigger was to toss the earth and the hand brushed against Jerry's chest. Grimly, too nervous to be amused, Jerry stepped away so that Tom could move out of the gravedigger's range. And as he did so, a second spadeful of earth showered over Tom.

"Oh, for—"

Tom was livid. He almost raised his voice. But another glance at the gravedigger dissuaded him.

The gravedigger's face when he shrugged and resumed his digging showed no emotion, no apology, nothing. He was slow-witted, without humor or imagination, and such a man could be unpredictable, even dangerous. Shuddering a little and suddenly cold with a chill that did not come from the cold of the night air alone, Tom glanced at his watch. At least there was still plenty of time left. His watch showed a few seconds before twelve. It was barely . . .

. . . midnight. In his car, with his suitcase stowed in the seat behind him, Alex glanced at the clock on the dashboard and made a mental calculation. Almost twelve. He should be waking up about now. The smile that crossed his face was cruel, sadistic. "Wonder how long it'll take before he realizes that his friend Alex isn't coming."

For a moment he savored that thought. Then his smile faded and he stepped hard on the accelerator. If he was right, if Maitland was just about then returning to consciousness, he could almost feel what

Maitland must be feeling, and the sensation made even his skin crawl.

And he was quite right. It was time. In his coffin, Maitland still lay without moving, an unseeing, unfeeling, living corpse in a silent world that presently echoed with a muted, unidentifiable sound. The sound came closer and closer until, at last, just as his eyelids fluttered open, it became recognizable. Someone was digging above him.

"Alex." His whisper was weak, but audible.

Still half in a daze, he tried to smile, and felt the stiff unwillingness of his facial muscles. They would not move . . .

But there was no time to think about that. The horror of where he was, the blackness that surrounded him like something solid, that seemed to press in on him, brought a sudden surge of terror . . .

The blackness *was* solid! It was squeezing him, constricting his lungs, he could not breathe . . . No! It wasn't the blackness! There was no air! The air in his coffin was almost exhausted! Racking coughs shook him as he clutched at his throat and tried again to breathe. No use. He had to get out! He was buried alive!

His hands found the lid of the coffin, pounded on it. But weakly. There was no strength in his arms and even what little he could muster was ebbing fast. His arms would not obey him. He could only scratch at the lid, his fingernails rasping.

"Alex!"

He thought that he spoke the name. But all that issued from his lips was a croak.

"Did you hear anything?"

Above, in the darkness that had grown even colder as the night progressed, Tom was holding his hand out toward the gravedigger as if to stop him from digging further. But the gravedigger did not stop. The look that he gave Tom was pregnant with the scorn that the unimaginative reserve for the

imaginative, and his spade did not falter. A few moments later he had uncovered the lid of the coffin. Carefully, he brushed away the thin layer of earth that still covered it.

Maitland, choking inside the coffin, felt rather than heard the scraping of his spade, and a look of renewed hope appeared on his tortured face. Even so, no sound left his lips when he tried again to croak, "Alex!" Alex had not forgotten him!

Nor, indeed, *had* Alex forgotten him. Alex, just then, was approaching the cemetery, and when his headlights lit up the cemetery gates just ahead of him down the road, his chuckle was grisly. "Hope you're comfortable in there, George."

His eyes still on the cemetery gate, he drove on. But even when he was closer, he did not see the little tableau at a distance behind it. And it was a tableau, a frozen moment, as though the actors concerned had just for an instant become statues.

The gravedigger had taken up his crowbar and he was standing in the grave beside the coffin, with Tom and Jerry staring down at him. For a moment none of them moved. Then the gravedigger set his crowbar to the coffin lid, heaved, and the lid was prized open. And it was somehow fitting that the moon, as the coffin lid came away, should just then be obscured by a passing cloud, that the air should suddenly turn even more icy. Because, in that moment, the corpse in the coffin sat up, gasping, and drew in huge gulps of that icy air.

There was no more silence then. The silence was gone, rent by shrieks of terror as Tom and Jerry ran. They ran blindly, unseeingly, in the direction of the gate. They blundered into tombstones, stumbled over graves, and burst through the gates into the roadway beyond still shrieking and not even seeing the glaring headlights of the car that bore down on them.

But if they did not see the car, the driver of the car saw them. Inside it, Alex reacted out of pure

instinct. His hands on the wheel swung it hard, so that the car skidded and went into a sweeping turn that spun it like a top and smashed it into a tree that grew by the side of the road, and chunks of metal flew in all directions.

A few seconds later, a spark found the car's ruptured gas tank. The explosion that followed transformed Alex into a gruesome mass of torn flesh and broken bones even before the fire that came hard on its heels spurted upward in an incredibly hot and all-consuming orange fountain that lighted up the roadway like a thousand lamps.

By its light, Tom and Jerry looked like stunned, frightened gnomes. Uncertain, bewildered, terrified, they could only gape at the flames in silence, overwhelmed by the horror of the last few moments. Until, at last, a shout from somewhere behind them made them turn.

"Hey!"

In the glow of the blazing wreckage that was Alex's funeral pyre they could see past the gate and well into the cemetery, to where the gravedigger stood beside Maitland's grave and beckoned to them.

Had they been in full possession of their faculties, had they not been dazed, they might not have heeded the gravedigger's call. As it was, that beckoning finger drew them so that they walked unwillingly back the way they had come, and that they stood at last again with the gravedigger and looked uncomprehendingly into his dull eyes.

"You can give me my money now," the gravedigger said. "He's all yours. Sorry about the head."

"The—head?"

It was Jerry who spoke. But it was Tom who first began to understand, whose disbelieving stare traveled downward to the crowbar that the gravedigger still held clutched in one huge paw. It was Tom whose already ashen face went even whiter, who gasped, "Oh, no!" when he saw the blood and the sickening patches of gray that stained the crowbar's iron length.

He would gladly have given his soul, in that mo-

ment, not to have to look into the grave—and yet he looked. He and Jerry both looked. They had to be certain . . . But they need not have bothered.

Maitland had fallen back into the coffin, and what could be seen of his face was twisted into a peculiar, wondering grimace. The crowbar had split his skull and smashed his brain to paste. Even as they stared, the blood that still flowed in streams and rivulets from his broken head merged into one and hid his questioning grimace behind an opaque veil of red.

5

"Preposterous." Critchit brushed an imaginary speck of lint from his sleeve. Throughout Maitland's recital he had sat with his lips pursed, and there was more than a hint of derision in his voice when he spoke. "A preposterous plan—a preposterous story."

Maitland, still held fast by the horror of his own tale, looked through him rather than at him. His eyes wide with lingering recollection, he blinked rapidly as if to blink away the terrible pictures that persisted in his memory.

"And yet it seems so real." He barely whispered it. "Almost as if—"

Critchit's contemptuous smile was lost upon him. If he heard when Critchit said, "You were going to do it?" he chose to ignore the question. The others, when it became obvious that there would be no reply, settled back into their chairs.

Only the actor showed an unwillingness to let the matter drop. "I know the feeling," he said. "I've had it often with—"

He too fell silent, his stare vague and his drink forgotten in his hand, and Critchit leaned forward impatiently.

"What?"

The actor let his stare move across the faces that watched him so intently. "All right, I'll tell you."

His eyes, no longer vague, came into focus. But not on the faces. It was as if he were staring across time and space at something that only he could see.

6

Almost any man other than Sebastian, after having traveled thousands of miles to see it, would have been delighted by the bazaar. It was a constantly changing kaleidoscope of sound and color. Except for a sprinkling of well-dressed tourists, it might have been a scene from the *Arabian Nights* complete even to the Hindu fakir about whom a small crowd was gathering as he prepared for his performance. Bullock-drawn carts, brown-skinned men in turbans, sari-clad women, hawkers, fortune tellers—they were all there. And all, to Sebastian, were a source of irritation. Calcutta in mid-summer is a sweatbox, a dank, evil-smelling sinkhole. Just the short walk across the cobbled square from the hotel where he and Inez were staying had been enough to drench him in perspiration and shorten his temper—so that his eyes, as he stared at the crowd who watched the fakir, were hostile and his lips curled into a contemptuous smile that was half a sneer. Fools! Were they really so ignorant that they did not know that magic was no more than illusion, that all magic, even his own, was merely clever trickery? Still, himself a performer, he could not resist a performance. Drawing Inez along behind him, he pushed his way through

the sweating mob until he had a clear view of the fakir and his entourage.

What he saw served only to deepen his contempt. Western audiences demanded spangles, glitter, glamour. That was Inez's function, she was not only his wife but his assistant—but here the audience was far more easily satisfied. The fakir, turbaned and swathed in a voluminous robe, his wizened old face hidden behind a gray beard and his feet bare, stood before a huge, circular wicker basket. On the cobbles by the basket lay a chipped and battered sword and an equally chipped and battered long-bladed dagger. Behind him, a Hindu girl of perhaps twenty squatted crosslegged, her toes protruding from under her skirts, and played on what looked to be a homemade reed pipe. That was all. No props, no spangles, no glitter. Only the fakir, the basket, the girl, and that thin, nerve-rasping music.

"Not exactly ready for top billing, are they?" Sebastian said.

Inez, brassily pretty despite the humidity that had already wilted her dress, was as contemptuous as he. "Hardly."

The crowd, however, did not seem to share their contempt. Far from it. Eager, they jostled each other in their efforts to move closer to the fakir until, with a wave of one thin arm, he brought them to attention. Standing so, with one arm raised and his other hand on the closed lid of the wicker basket, he waited until the crowd was silent, and even Sebastian had to admit, however grudgingly, that the old man knew his trade. No act, not even the most skilled, could hope to succeed unless it had the full attention of its audience, and the fakir certainly had that. Still with his hand resting on the lid of the basket, he stepped behind it so that the basket was between him and the crowd, and spoke in spaced, careful tones. "I have before me a magic basket, blessed by the gods of the temple." It was a good beginning—provocative—and Sebastian nodded. "I

open the basket." The fakir suited his actions to the words, raised the lid. Bent over the basket, he called loudly.

"Akbar!"

Disgusted again, Sebastian snorted. Not the old basket trick! He had, just for a moment, hoped for something more, perhaps even something new. But he should have known. From somewhere in the crowd a small boy appeared and approached the basket, his eyes too old and too wise for his ten-year-old face as the fakir placed a brown hand on his head.

His own head thrown back as if in the beginnings of a trance, the fakir again stood motionless, testing the interest of the crowd, and found it to his liking. "I give you my blessing. May the gods of the temple protect you from all danger."

Perspiration was trickling down Sebastian's back. His shirt was wet with it. Damn! It was the old basket trick, after all. Ten thousand miles—for this. His anger with the fakir, with the heat, with his own discomfort, etched thin lines in his forehead.

Yet even then, he stayed. One never knew . . .

Slowly, as he had obviously been taught, the boy lifted one leg and then the other over the lip of the basket and stood inside it. A pause for effect, and then he was sinking down, gathering in upon himself, crouching, until the top of his head was no longer visible. The lid, equipped with a metal ring that matched another ring on the side of the basket, slammed down on him.

From somewhere, even Sebastian did not see from where, the fakir produced a rusty padlock, slipped its bar through the two rings, snapped it shut, and then tugged at the basket lid to prove that it had really been locked in place.

"And now—"

The fakir did not complete the sentence. Still keeping the basket between himself and the onlookers, he took up the chipped sword, held it up before him with both hands, and let his eyes travel along its length to its tip. The eyes of the crowd,

Sebastian's and Inez's among them, followed involuntarily—and then snapped downward as the fakir suddenly turned the sword so that its tip was poised directly above the basket.

"Pray for the soul of the one within!"

The sword thrust down in a straight line, pierced the basket, plunged on, and the crowd gasped in horror as a shriek of mortal agony answered its passage. Tourists and natives all stood suddenly frozen. All but Sebastian and Inez. Inez, amused, smiled. Sebastian, though he was not aware of it, looked angry, put upon. The stupid horror of the crowd as the fakir withdrew his sword from the basket only deepened his scowl. The sword was covered with blood—blood, indeed!—and they were all properly impressed. *His* audiences were not so simple. They constantly demanded something new, different . . .

Again and again, the fakir plunged his sword into the basket, piercing it at a dozen angles, and then tossed the sword aside with a theatrical carelessness and opened the basket with a key that he took from under his robe. Drawing the action out so that it took as long as possible, he opened the basket. Instantly, the boy Akbar leaped to his feet and waved his arms to indicate that he was unhurt.

"The gods be praised for this miracle." The fakir, his own arms raised skyward in thanks, waited.

Now—now, surely, the audience would jeer. Sebastian was certain of it. He was disappointed. The burst of applause that followed was heartfelt, sincere. The idiots!

Akbar had leaped from the basket and was vanishing into the crowd. But the performance was not over. Again, the fakir stooped, and this time came erect with the long-bladed dagger gleaming dully in his fist. Deliberately, again dragging out every movement, he lifted the dagger to his bearded cheek with one hand. Fascinated, the crowd watched as he pressed its point against his flesh. The point entered the skin, vanished, and as it did so his other hand came up so that for an instant his face was

hidden. When he took his hands away, the dagger remained. The dagger had pierced both his cheeks; its tip protruded from one side of his face, its hilt from the other.

"A trick!"

Someone in the crowd, at least, was not an utter fool. Sebastian's eyes mirrored his satisfaction.

But the fakir still had not yet done. His head shook slowly in denial and his lips parted, opened wide. In the glaring sunlight, the inside of his mouth was clearly visible. The shaft of the dagger's blade, incongruous between his blackened teeth, was there for all to see.

"No trick—and no pain. The power of yoga." The fakir's words were indistinct, obstructed by the metal that skewered his cheeks from one side to the other, but still understandable.

It was too much. Sebastian's grunt was the very acme of pure disgust. Miserable, uncomfortable, disappointed, he could stand no more. There was no real reason other than his own pettiness and irritation for what he did then, but he had had enough.

Moving quickly, he stepped forward, grasped the tip of the dagger with one hand and its hilt with the other, and pulled. The "dagger" came away in his grasp. Except, of course, that it was not a dagger at all, but merely a handle with a blade that had reached only as far as the fakir's cheek and then bent away into a U shape that had been concealed by his beard. The other end of the U, the point that had seemed to protrude from his opposite cheek, was simply a continuation of the curve.

Only the fakir's gasp of astonishment was needed in order for Sebastian to go on to the completion of his revelation. As the old man's mouth opened, Sebastian's long magician's fingers reached between his parted lips and came away with the bit of steel that the Hindu had placed there when he brought both hands to his face—the "blade" of the dagger. Sebastian raised the ridiculous prop high, so that even the watchers at the far rear of the audience

could see it. "He has the real dagger up his sleeve."

The mutterings that answered him were a pleasing reward, but it was still not enough. Disregarding the fakir as though he were not there, he tossed the fake dagger aside and bent over the wicker basket, punching at its walls from inside. At the first impact, a double trap door at the rear of the basket swung open. Akbar, even the slowest of the crowd could see at once, had never been in any danger. He had not even been in the basket when the sword thrust through it; all that had been required of him was that he escape through the trap door and so into hiding beneath the fakir's flowing robe before the basket was pierced.

Sebastian's voice dripped with sarcasm. "No gods, no supernatural powers, no yoga. Just tricks. As a fellow magician, I can assure you of that."

The muttering of the crowd faded, changed. Gradually, the muttering became laughter. The crowd had gathered to be entertained, and entertained they had been. But none, as they turned away from the fakir, tossed at his feet the small coins that would ordinarily have been his reward.

For a moment, he and Sebastian looked into each other's eyes. Then the fakir's eyes dropped. Shamed, he hung his head and did not look up as Sebastian took Inez's arm and followed the crowd. Neither of them, as they left, looked back. And so they did not see the Indian girl who still squatted on the cobblestones, her flute silent in her lap, and glared after them. Her eyes, unlike the fakir's, were not obscured by shame. They were wide, hot, blazing with hatred.

Nor would it have mattered to Sebastian and Inez if they had looked back. The girl was hardly of any importance to either of them. Inez, in fact, was laughing. She and Sebastian were two of a kind and she understood perfectly what had motivated him. Magic, after all, was their business and it would not do to have that business degraded, even in this Godforsaken country, even if their bookings *had* been few and far between of late.

Besides, Sebastian had already forgotten the fakir. His handkerchief in hand, he was mopping his damp face when they entered their hotel room a few minutes later. If he had forgotten the fakir, he had not forgotten his discomfort. The look that he gave the barely rotating ceiling fan was proof of that.

"Phew! It's hot. That fan doesn't seem to do much good, does it."

"No, not much." Inez was considering. Their time in India, thus far, had hardly been a rousing success. "Why don't we pack up and go home? We wanted to see the land of ancient mystery—well, we've seen it, and there isn't a mystery in sight. Not even a new trick for our act. How about it?"

Sebastian, too, considered. Inez was right, of course. Their trip had been a disaster. Still . . . A hint of the stubbornness that was an inherent part of his nature was visible in the set of his lips when he spoke again. "Let's give it another day or two. Who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

Inez did not insist. "If you say so." Hard and brittle as she was, Sebastian could be even harder when he felt mean, and the heat had made him mean. It was obvious. "I think I'll take a shower."

Sebastian hardly heard her. For the rest of what remained of the afternoon he maintained a dour silence, lost in his own thoughts, and that night tossed and turned restlessly as he lay beside her. Somewhere, there had to be something that he could use, some trick that would add novelty to the act that he and Inez had performed for so long and that had, at last, gone stale from overexposure. One new trick was all that they needed, something spectacular, and they would be top of the heap again . . .

It was that thought that drove him from the hotel and back into the square again the next morning, while Inez still slept. Even knowing that it was hopeless, he still had to try. A coursing dog following a faint and all but hopeless trail, he stepped into the glare of another steaming, impossibly bright day and halted, frustrated.

The square was empty except for those few shopkeepers who had risen as early as he and were already removing the shutters from the dingy cubicles in which they conducted their business. He would have to seek elsewhere. Calcutta, Lord knew, did not lack for bazaars.

Cursing the heat as always, he strolled across the square, not heading in any particular direction, and at the spot where he had confronted the fakir the day before chuckled sourly before moving on. But he had gone scarcely a hundred yards before he again came to a halt.

To his left was the mouth of a street that was little more than an alley, and from the alley he could hear a familiar sound; someone was playing an Indian tune on a reed pipe and the music drew him to the alley and into it. The fakir again? Curious, he walked between crude stone-walled buildings that seemed to lean inward so that the sunlight was shut out and it was as if he had suddenly stepped from day into night. Refuse and the offal of animals was everywhere and his nostrils wrinkled in distaste, but even so he went on. Until, in time, he realized that he was in a cul-de-sac. Ahead, where practically no light at all could enter, there was a wall that cut off further progress.

He did not at first see the girl seated before the wall, but when he did, he recognized her at once. He had, the day before, given her hardly a glance, but there was no mistaking her. Squatting crosslegged with her bare feet showing from under the edges of her skirts, her pipe to her lips, she was exactly as she had been then. There was even a wicker basket, a smaller replica of the one the fakir had used, open in front of her.

The girl did not look up as he approached. Her eyes fixed on the open basket, she continued to make her rasping, unpleasant music as he bent to look into it. Inside the basket there was a coil of thick yellow rope, and for a moment he had the uncanny impression that the coils were moving, writhing slowly as if

in time with the music. Startled, he drew in his breath and then stared, fascinated.

The music of the pipe had become almost strident. It rose higher and higher. And as it did so the tip of the rope lifted like the head of a snake and left the basket! Still in time with the music, it rose until at least three feet of its length were stiffly upright.

Sebastian could not take his eyes away. He had heard of the famous Indian rope trick, of course, but he had never seen it performed. The rope trick was a myth, a fable. And yet even as he watched the rope continued its ascent, climbed until it stood like a steel rod and he could see its top only by tilting his head back until he was looking straight up!

Sudden silence brought his eyes back to the girl. She had stopped playing just at the instant when the rope reached its full height and as he watched she set down her pipe and walked to the basket. Still not looking at Sebastian, she grasped the rope and effortlessly, easily, pulled herself up hand over hand until she was high above and looking down at him. Sebastian was impressed. Stare as he would, he could detect no mechanical device, no wires, nothing to explain what he had just seen.

"All right, what's the trick?" This time, there was no contempt in his voice.

The girl, if she understood him at all, did not answer. Her only reply was to return his stare steadily for a moment before sliding back down the rope. Silent, she returned to her place by the wall, squatted again, and clapped her hands. At the sound, the rope collapsed back into its basket.

Amazement, cupidity, and cunning flickered across Sebastian's eyes and were gone. What he had seen was fantastic, but it would not do to let the girl know that he thought so. These natives, when they smelled a profit, could be as greedy as any westerner. Casually, almost negligently, he pointed to the basket as if asking permission to examine it.

The girl smiled, nodded. And if her smile was not warm, he did not notice. The girl did not interest

him. The rope did. But the rope, when he had picked it up and examined every inch of it, told him nothing. It was a thick hempen rope, no more. Nor did the basket which had contained it serve to dispel his deepening frown of puzzlement. The basket contained no mechanism of any kind. One could purchase a hundred just like it in any bazaar.

"How much?" There was no other way.

For answer, the girl tilted her head questioningly.

"How much do you want for the trick? Name your price."

The girl's head moved slowly from side to side. She did understand him, then. "There is no trick. The magic is in the rope."

Magic? That brought the curl back to his lips. But he had expected something of the sort. Anything to raise the price, eh? "Then sell me the rope."

"I cannot." He could barely see the girl's face in the gloom of the alley but it seemed to him that her eyes glowed like an animal's. "It was my mother's and her mother's, and—"

"Forty thousand rupees." Sebastian was in no mood for history. The sum he had named, to a barefoot and probably illiterate native, was a fortune. She would have to accept . . .

"It is not for sale. Not at any price." There was no mistaking the finality in the girl's voice. There would be no more bargaining.

He had been prepared to offer fifty thousand rupees, even more, if necessary. Instead, his jaw set hard as he glared at her. Wordless with rage, he turned on his heel and walked back the way he had come.

Inez, when he told her about the girl later, was as impressed as he had been. Sebastian had few peers in the profession and if he had been impressed by the trick there was no question but that it was remarkable. For hours, they spoke of nothing else, and when he fell again into one of his dour silences she left him alone. If there was a way to obtain the trick he would find it. As greedy as he, she waited.

By nightfall, he had made up his mind. He had been drinking steadily and his face was flushed when he finally turned to her, another drink in his hand, and said for perhaps the twentieth time, "I'm sure it's a trick! But I examined the rope, and the basket, and I couldn't see how it was rigged."

"And she wouldn't sell it?" The question was superfluous, Sebastian had already repeated his story over and over again, but it was something to say.

He did not seem to hear her. As though he had forgotten her, he turned to stare out of the window at the square and, as she watched him, took a huge swallow from his drink. "If I couldn't figure out how it worked, no one else will be able to. It'll be a sensation. We've got to get it."

"So?"

"So—we're *going* to get it! Without it, we'll be playing one night stands for the rest of our lives."

He had spoken with his back still to her. When he turned again to face her there was a question in his eyes. What he had in mind would involve risk. But he need not have been concerned. The rapport between him and Inez was—always had been—a true meeting of minds. Her enameled prettiness had about it the dangerous grace of a panther as she leaned toward him. "So?"

"So if we're going to get our hands on the trick, we can't be too choosey about how we go about it. Agreed?"

She understood him perfectly. "Agreed. Just tell me what I have to do."

He told her. And when he had done, she did not recoil. There was, really, no choice. Not for two people to whom money and success meant everything.

In the morning, he left her alone in their room when he returned to the alley where he had spoken to the girl. And the girl was there. The girl, when he had entered the alley and walked its odorous length, was sitting crosslegged by the wall almost as if she had never left it and her head did not come up until he stood directly in front of her.

Sebastian had half expected, if he found her at all, to find her playing on her pipe. Instead, the pipe lay in her lap. But the basket that contained the rope was beside her. That was the important thing.

"The trick you showed me yesterday—" he began.

"No trick!" The girl's head wagged vigorously.

"The—well, the magic that you showed me yesterday, then. I told my wife about it. She wondered if you could show it to her." Everything depended upon the girl's reply, yet he managed to make what he said sound fairly casual. "Will you?"

The girl waved toward the basket. "Gladly. I am always here."

"No. My wife is ill. We wondered if you could come to our hotel room."

Again, the girl shook her head.

"I'll pay you two hundred rupees just to show it to her." She *had* to say yes! The word that rose to Sebastian's lips was one that he rarely used. "Please?"

It must have been the word that did it. It hung between them as they looked into each other's eyes. Then the girl nodded. Moving with the almost feline ease that seemed to distinguish so many Indian women, she rose to her feet and, when she had tucked the flute under a fold of her sari, stooped to pick up her basket. Together, they left the alley.

Inez, waiting by the window of the hotel room, could see them as they crossed the square, the girl dwarfed by Sebastian's western height. She and Sebastian had started the day with tall glasses of gin and tonic, neglecting breakfast, and she still held her glass as she left the window. Before setting it down, she emptied it at a gulp. The next few moments would not be pleasant. But, she shrugged, they were necessary.

By the time Sebastian's knock sounded at the door she was in bed, a light coverlet hiding her dressing gown.

"Come in."

The Indian girl entered first. Sebastian, a step behind her, was the perfect model of a concerned

husband as he pressed a chaste kiss to Inez's forehead.

"This is Inez—my wife."

The girl bowed slightly from the waist, palms together in the traditional Hindu greeting. "I am sorry that you are ill." She had set her basket down on the floor. Not waiting for a reply, she seated herself beside it, produced her pipe, and began to play the same discordant tune that both Inez and Sebastian had heard before. At the first note, the rope began its slow rise into the air.

Inez's eyes widened, but the warning finger that Sebastian placed to his lips silenced her gasp before it was voiced. Moving carefully and keeping his eyes glued to the Indian girl's back, he reached behind the chair that stood by the bed. His hand, when he brought it back into view, held a long Indian sword very much like the one that the fakir had used as a prop.

Intent on her music, the girl did not see or hear him as he moved toward her. The rope had already climbed half its length toward the ceiling and she had eyes for nothing else.

Sebastian's face was a grim mask. Delicately, setting one foot before the other as though dancing a ballet, he moved closer—closer still—until he was directly behind her.

His thrust, when he lunged forward, drove the sword completely through the girl. He could feel it grate against bone, twist in his hand as she half rose, her head jerking back and her mouth gaping open.

Had it not been for the blade that transfixed her, protruding a good twelve inches from her breast, she would have toppled sideways. But that did not happen until Sebastian, yanking viciously, pulled the sword from her body. As he did so, she fell; in the same instant, the rope went slack, dropped back into its basket. This time, despite herself, Inez could not choke back the gasp that escaped her.

"Be still!" Sebastian, after a first moment of revulsion, was in complete control of himself. Bent over, he was already grasping the girl's body by the shoul-

ders, dragging her toward the closet at the other side of the room.

Nor was Inez far behind. Before he had reached the closet she was already there. Inside the closet there was a steamer trunk; she was fumbling with the trunk's clasps by the time he had dragged the corpse close.

"We'll put her in there later." Sebastian was eager. "Let's see what the trick is first." Heaving, he dumped the girl's limp weight on top of the trunk, found the sword, and threw that in after her, and closed the closet door. Neither he nor Inez gave the closet a second glance. Both had their eyes fixed on the basket.

"She said the trick was in the rope." Sebastian was moving toward the basket as he spoke.

For perhaps ten minutes, after they had pulled the rope from its container, they felt of it, coiled and uncoiled it, explored it with their fingers.

Inez was the first to give up. Disappointment made her voice almost a sob. "It isn't hollow, there's no wire in it—there's nothing. Nothing!"

"There's got to be!" Sebastian's answering voice was savage. Again, beginning at one end of it and working his way to the other, he examined the rope.

Nothing!

But that wasn't possible. There had to be . . .

"Wait a minute!" His heel, as he turned to Inez, had brushed against something. The Indian girl's pipe, lying where it had fallen from her dead hands. "Her flute!"

"Her flute? You think that might be the answer? You can't be serious."

"Can you think of any other answer? It's at least worth a try!"

His viciousness silenced her. The pipe in his hand, he seated himself on the floor and crossed his legs, imitating the Indian girl's position as closely as he could and feeling like a fool. But there was no other way. The flute had to be the key.

Tentatively, his fingers placed haphazardly on the

stops, he put the pipe to his mouth and blew into it. At once, the rope began to stir. The notes he blew were nerve-racking, completely without relationship to each other, but they confirmed what he had not really dared hope for. The tip of the rope rose, writhed higher and higher. Until, incredibly, the rope hung suspended in midair, the tip of it touching the ceiling, the rest of it still writhing, snakelike.

Gasping, Sebastian paused for breath.

"Keep playing!"

Again, he blew into the pipe. Higher notes, this time.

The rope stiffened, went rigid. When he took his mouth from the pipe it remained upright, unmoving.

"We've done it!" Inez was almost dancing with excitement. In her mind's eye she was already seeing their audiences of the future—audiences amazed, mystified, applauding deliriously. Her fingers fumbled with the buttons of her dressing gown, flung the gown aside. "And now, just as it will be in our act—"

Lithe and eager in bra and panties, she made an attractive picture as she tugged at the rope, testing it. "It holds me. I can climb it." Her eyes were shining. Not waiting for his approval, she began to climb.

"No, wait." Sebastian, on his feet, was troubled and did not know why. It was all too simple, too easy.

"Wait? For what?"

"Nothing—nothing. Go ahead." His own eyes were as eager as hers as she continued her climb.

Inez pulled herself higher. And because of that, because he was below and she was looking upward at the ceiling, he did not see what she saw, did not see her sudden expression of pain or the look of stark horror that contorted her face, that twisted it into a caricature of her usual prettiness.

"Sebastian!"

So much he heard and understood. The rest was a terrifying scream that burst from her lips and echoed from the walls and left him gaping up at the

rope incredulously and then with a horror that matched the twisted expression that had distorted Inez's face just before she screamed.

Inez was gone, vanished, obliterated. Only the rope still stood, its tip touching the ceiling.

"Inez! Inez, where are you?"

His shout died on his lips. Just above the tip of the rope, the white ceiling had suddenly darkened. Even as he stared, a red stain spread across the ceiling until it made a small circle—a wet circle that gave birth to a thick liquid that flowed toward the center of the circle and then dripped, drop by crimson drop, onto the floor below. A pool of blood—it was blood, there was no mistaking it—began to form at his feet.

Terrified, he watched the pool grow. Every instinct that he possessed was shrieking, warning him to run, to get out, and still he remained. It was only the light touch of something against his cheek that awakened him from his near-trance at last.

The rope! The rope was no longer rigidly upright. It had bent down upon itself as though alive, it was swaying, reaching for him. Completely in the grip of panic, he leaped back, raced to the door, grasped the door handle—and the rope whipped down, lashed across his wrist, so that he too howled with pain.

It *was* alive! It came after him as he fled to the window, coiling and uncoiling itself, forcing him to climb over the bed in his frantic efforts to escape. And at the other side of the bed, it was waiting for him. He feinted, made a pretense of climbing back across the bed, turned as the rope followed his feint, ran again to the door. And the rope was ahead of him, lashing at him, forcing him to dodge, herding him.

Back—back—there was no other way he could go. The rope was everywhere, lunging as though it were a sentient, intelligent thing, a diabolical thing, a thing that gave him no respite until he stood, finally, with his back to the door of the closet. Then, as if

satisfied, the rope hovered, still for just an instant. And in that instant the door of the closet swung open and the corpse of the Indian girl fell from where he had thrown it and struck the backs of his legs, distracting him. He half turned, looked down. . .

That was when the rope caught him. It struck suddenly, looping itself around his neck and drawing tight so that his shriek of fear was cut off, strangled. He fought, of course. He fought madly, insanely. But there was no escape from that incredible pressure around his throat. Presently, suffused with blood, his face began to turn black. His eyes protruded from their sockets. His hands, gripped tightly around the yellow hemp that was choking the life from him, fell away. He could no longer feel, no longer think . . .

Only just before the end was there a last faint gleam of light in his eyes. Just before the end, his numbed brain flickered for the last time. He thought of the Indian girl, of the fakir. There was no such thing as true magic. All magic was a trick, an illusion. Even this, what was happening to him, was an illusion. It had to be. There could be no other explanation, no other answer.

So he thought—and thinking it, died. And that was a pity. Because if he had been still alive, if he had been able to walk again in the bazaar only a few minutes later, he might have found the real answer.

Had he walked in the bazaar, he might have seen the tourists and the brown-skinned men and the sari-clad women gathering again around the fakir in his flowing robe as the old man opened his basket and said, "I have before me a magic basket blessed by the gods of the temple. I open it." He might have seen the fakir raise his eyes until they were looking directly at the window of the room in which he still lay and where the rope still hung in midair, still swayed gently. He might, most importantly, have seen what happened when the fakir called, "Akbar!" and a small boy ran from the crowd to take his place in the basket.

Because just after he had intoned his formula—"I

give you my blessing. May the gods protect you from all danger"—the fakir turned for a moment to smile at someone who squatted on the cobblestones behind him. Someone whose bare toes poked out from under the edges of her skirts and whose sari showed no signs of blood, no rents or tears such as might have been made by the passage of a sword through her body. Someone, an Indian girl of perhaps twenty, who smiled back at the fakir and then lifted what looked to be a homemade native pipe to her lips and began to play a harsh, discordant Indian tune.

7

Sebastian's eyes were still focused on infinity, on something that only he could see. And that something —vision, premonition, whatever it was—had frozen him in his seat. A man condemned to death might have sat so, and the others, respecting what he must be feeling, said nothing.

Except, again, for Critchit. Critchit, his contemptuous smile still playing about his lips, did not share their consideration. "You look as if you've seen a ghost," he said, and somehow made the words insulting.

"There are no such things as ghosts except in a magician's illusions." Sebastian, speaking more to himself than to Critchit, completely missed Critchit's smile.

But the artist did not. The artist, when Critchit turned to him and said, "And you?" regarded Critchit coldly.

"You're the one who started this. Why not yours first?"

"My what?" Critchit, taken aback, pretended puzzlement.

But there was no mistaking the challenge that the

artist flung at him. "Dream, phobia, obsession, fear —whatever you want to call it."

Critchit's laugh was strained but it died away as he became aware of the questioning stares that were being directed at him by the others. "Oh, my fear is very strange indeed." The words, sneeringly spoken, were intended to dismiss the artist's challenge, and they failed. The others still waited expectantly.

In the face of their expectations, he had no choice. And despite himself, he could not suppress a small shudder as he, too, remembered.

"Strange," he repeated, "but so real—so real . . ."

8

Wilson, Critchit noticed, was watching him with a faintly amused smile, and he found the smile annoying. Irritated, he concentrated on his task of wiping a purely imaginary stain from his water glass with his napkin and wondered, for the tenth time in as many minutes, what on earth had ever possessed him to ask the man to lunch. He and Wilson had known each other ever since their school days at Eton, but they had never really had anything in common—Wilson's rather badly knotted necktie and carelessly unbuttoned jacket were proof of *that*—and his invitation when they had met at the door of the restaurant had been no more than common politeness. But Wilson had accepted, and now that the amenities had been done the silence between them was awkward.

Nor did Wilson seem inclined to break that silence. Lips twitching, he continued to watch as Critchit replaced the water glass precisely at the proper angle to his table setting and then leaned back, relieved by the distraction, as a waiter approached their cubicle with whiskey and a siphon of soda on a tray. Critchit's relief, however, was short lived. Even when the waiter had poured their drinks and

departed, Wilson did not speak. It was Critchit, finally, who found something to say.

"Congratulate me, Wilson. I'm going to get married."

Just what he expected by way of reply, he could not have said, but the reply that Wilson did make was typical of him. Small wonder that he and Wilson had never become close. The man had no conception of the proprieties.

"At your age?"

"Why not?" Critchit was nettled. Still, one did not show anger if it could be avoided; anger was an unpleasant, untidy emotion. "I've spent my whole lifetime acquiring a fortune, a home, beautiful things. Now I need someone to take care of them—and of me. Is that so strange?"

"Strange?" One of Wilson's eyebrows had lifted quizzically and his tone was ironic, but Critchit did not notice. "No, I suppose not. Who's the lucky girl?"

"Daughter of a friend of mine, Colonel Carruthers."

"Carruthers?" Astonishment momentarily replaced the irony in Wilson's voice. "Little Eleanor?"

" 'Little Eleanor' is a grown woman now. And very charming."

"Then why on earth should she marry you?" The question was not asked to hurt. It had been the product of honest surprise. Even Critchit knew that. And yet, it stung.

"A woman has to marry someone," he said coldly. "And I'm not a bad catch, even if I do say so myself. Very easy to get along with, actually."

Deliberately, he picked up his fork and began to polish it as he had the water glass, so that he would not have to face the new expression that had come into Wilson's eyes. He could not quite classify the expression, but it made him uneasy. "Wouldn't you say?"

The discussion of "little Eleanor" was over. Wilson, irritated in turn, came close to answering Critchit's question in the negative. But such an answer

would merely have made an uncomfortable moment even more uncomfortable.

"Of course." He raised his glass. "To you and Eleanor. Congratulations, and may you both find happiness," he said, and meant it. But even as he spoke the words, he was remembering Eleanor as he had last seen her—a slight, gentle child, ever eager to please and almost pathetically grateful for even the smallest sign of approval.

Eleanor and Critchit? A butterfly yoked to a wasp? Wilson sincerely hoped that she *would* be happy. But he doubted it. He doubted it very much.

The living room of the house, like the house itself, never failed to give Critchit a little thrill of pleasure, and when he had set the record on the turntable of the hi-fi, he turned for a moment to contemplate the room with satisfaction. It was good to be in his own private world, where the disorder and the messiness that he loathed could not penetrate. The very balance of the room, the way each gleaming piece of furniture had been placed for a maximum of comfort and attractiveness, made him feel good. Content, he walked to the polished side table where he kept his glittering array of fine wines in their crystal decanters and poured himself a drink. Sipping it appreciatively, he cocked an ear for a little while toward the hi-fi, enjoying the rich, full tone of it, and then carried the drink to his favorite chair.

Ah. The chair was just right. Long usage had moulded it to fit his body exactly. Automatically, he reached down to the magazine rack beside the chair—and frowned. The rack was not there.

Puzzled, he let his eyes roam again about the room, and frowned again when he spied the rack by the far wall. Seeing it there set a tiny flaw in the structure of his contentment, and he disliked flaws.

"Eleanor?"

Almost at once, Eleanor appeared from the library, smiling her little girl's smile. She had changed little, really, from what she had been as a child, and it was

so that he spoke to her—as though she were still a child.

"You've rearranged the furniture." He did not raise his voice. If anything, he spoke even more softly than usual. But his tone was still a reproof.

"Yes, I thought it would look better if—" Eleanor's explanation faded uncertainly as she caught his expression.

Critchit was amazed. "You've rearranged the furniture!" he repeated incredulously. "I reach for a magazine—and it isn't there!"

Just for a breath, Eleanor's face contorted slightly. But she had learned very quickly that Critchit detested displays of emotion, and the tears did not come.

"Well, you must admit that it looks much nicer this way, darling," she said, and again fell silent. Critchit was staring at her as though she had taken leave of her senses.

"You've rearranged the furniture!" he said for the third time. "I won't be able to find a thing."

Despite herself, Eleanor's lips quivered. "If it bothers you that much—"

"Well, of course it bothers me!" Critchit's voice did rise this time, but only enough to indicate his disapproval. Eleanor was easily confused, and confused people make for more confusion. She was still, after all, rather virgin soil. She would learn. "Of course it bothers me," he said again, and was not aware that he had pursed his lips, that he spoke like a schoolmaster. "A place for everything and everything in its place. That's how a society is run, that's how a business is run, and that's how a home should be run. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Arthur." By an effort of will, Eleanor controlled the trembling of her own lips.

"Good." Critchit nodded, sipped again from his drink. But his eyes did not leave her, and that added to her nervousness. Made awkward by his stare, she crossed the room and brought him the magazine rack.

"Is that better?"

"Fine." The word was not an approval, it was a dismissal, and she left him.

Again, Critchit cocked an ear toward the hi-fi. Beethoven's Fifth. He always enjoyed Beethoven's Fifth. But his mind kept turning to Eleanor. Despite his appreciation of the music, despite the restored perfection of the room, she had spoiled his evening, and he resented it. Eleanor would really have to learn not to disturb the even tenor of his way of life . . .

Still, as the music swelled and the evening progressed, he was able to put the incident out of his thoughts. Eleanor did not disturb him again. He was able to read in peace, until he was deliciously weary and ready for bed. He looked forward to that. He took an almost sensuous delight in fresh, crisp sheets, and one of the first things that he had taught Eleanor was that their bed linen was to be changed every day—*every* day, and no exceptions. His lips pursed again in the expression that was so typical of him and of which he was completely unaware. He hoped that she had not forgotten.

He need not have been concerned, however. Eleanor was asleep when he entered the bedroom, but the sheets and the pillowcase on his side of the huge double bed were fresh and unmarred. She slept curled up like a puppy, but she had remembered. Even asleep, she kept to her own side of the bed, so that his side would not be disturbed.

That pleased him. So much, in fact, that he looked down at her with something that almost resembled affection before he undressed and slipped under the coverlet. Content again, he was asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

So, of course, he did not know that Eleanor was not really asleep at all. He had no idea, while he snored softly, that she lay awake for hours, staring into the darkness, with her eyes damp. Just as, in the morning, he had no idea that she was watching him from under lowered lids when he awoke re-

freshed and eager for the day and went to the bathroom to shower and shave. He had slept well, exceedingly well, and the events of last night had been forgotten.

Presently, wisps of steam appeared around the bathroom door as he turned on the shower. Then, suddenly, his voice filled the bedroom. He had, actually, a rather pleasant baritone, but he sang offkey and too loudly and his choice of songs was hardly a considerate one. *Rule Britannia,* bellowed at seven in the morning, was jarring. In the bedroom, Eleanor made a small grimace.

Just the same, she smiled at him when he emerged from the bathroom freshly shaved and wearing a dressing gown. Six months of marriage had already taught her many things and one of those things was that Critchit expected her to be cheerful and pleasant at all times.

"Well, you're up. Good morning, dear."

Critchit was in a high good humor. He was roaring *Rule Britannia* again when he went to the chest of drawers and opened it—even throwing in an occasional "boom-ti-tum-tum"—but he did not really see her smile of greeting. Dressing was serious business to him and even as he reached into the drawer that held his underthings he was mentally selecting his wardrobe for the day.

The blue tweed, perhaps. And that new double-knit shirt—. A sound behind him made him turn. Eleanor was sitting up in bed and staring at him. And she was laughing. Laughing? At him? It made no sense. Until he looked down at himself.

Even as he was making his mental selection, he had slipped into the garment that he had taken from the drawer and then removed his dressing gown—and suddenly, his face was grim. The picture that he made *was* humorous. But not to him. Instead of his usual shorts, he was wearing a pair of Eleanor's lacy panties. His expression as he redonned his dressing gown and stripped off the panties wiped the amusement from her face as if with a sponge.

Holding the panties, he came to stand beside her, his eyes icy.

"What's this?"

"They're"—her own eyes pleaded—"they're mine."

"You don't say." The inanity of her reply rasped across his nerves like a file. But—patience, patience. "What are they doing in my drawer?"

"I moved your things to your side of the bed." To Eleanor, as she waved a hand to indicate the dresser at the other side of the room, what she said obviously made eminent sense, and that grated on him, too.

"I see. But I've always kept my shorts in this drawer—right here on the left—folded in half, buttons up." He spoke through his teeth. But patiently, patiently. It was no use. Eleanor's stare was vague, almost uncomprehending.

"How can one *live* in disorder?" His patience was at an end. Her vacant stare was too much.

"I'm sorry—"

"Sorry doesn't set things right! There's a right way and a wrong way to do everything!"

How *would* he teach her? The way she kept staring at him, as though he were an ogre—she had no conception of the *importance* of what he was saying . . .

Somewhere, he had read that children learn best not by being taught but by being shown. One picture is worth a thousand words. And she was still, despite her woman's body, despite the gold band on her finger, very much a child.

"I'll show you," he said, and turned toward the bedroom door. "Come along."

Chastened and obedient, Eleanor left the bed at once and, not even pausing to find her slippers, followed him downstairs to the cellar door. Together, they made a grim little cortege of silence, but when Critchit had led the way down the wooden cellar stairs and switched on a light, his face relaxed somewhat. Here, at least, all was as it should be.

The cellar, immaculately clean, had been divided

into two halves. In one stood the boiler and the odds and ends that he had accumulated over the years, in the other stood his workshop. And the workshop, at least to him, was a joy to behold. Complete with power tools, bench, and shelves of jars containing almost anything that a home handyman might need, it reflected his personality even more perfectly than did the rest of the house.

"My workshop," he said unnecessarily. Eleanor had seen the workshop before, but he spoke as if she were setting eyes on it for the first time. For his purposes, indeed, she was seeing it for the first time. Eleanor, he was quite certain, had never really *looked* at the workshop; certainly she had never looked at it as he did, appreciating its orderliness. "I love to make things. It relaxes me. But"—he looked directly into her eyes—"but I couldn't make anything at all if I didn't keep my tools and my screws and my bolts and nuts filed neatly away, now could I?"

"No, Arthur."

His hand indicated the jars neatly arrayed on their shelves like soldiers on parade. "Nails by sizes and lengths, screws by kind, size, thread, diameter—I know where everything is. All I have to do is reach out my hand and find it. And that's the value of neatness."

"Yes, Arthur." Eleanor was hanging her head.

He left it at that. There was no need to belabor the point. This time, he was sure, Eleanor had absorbed her lesson. And it would not do to be late at his office. One had to set an example for one's employees.

"See that you remember."

Upstairs, afterward, he dressed with his usual care —blue tweed trousers, white shirt and dark blue tie, blue socks. At the clothes closet he paused for a moment, sniffing. A faint aroma of sizzling bacon had seeped into the room from the kitchen below and it made his mouth water. He always had a hearty appetite in the morning. Momentarily dis-

tracted, he reached down for his shoes and was seated on the bed, just putting them on, when Eleanor came into the bedroom.

"Breakfast is ready." Her smile was contrite. "Will you be down soon?"

The smile that he gave her in turn was without warmth. "In a minute." He had finished putting on his shoes, and as he spoke he was walking again to the clothes closet. The blue jacket that matched his trousers was in his hands when she heard his sigh from the door and turned to see him shaking his head.

The sigh alerted her at once. "What is it?"

"This closet." He was looking at the closet as though it contained a nest of vipers. "These clothes. Hangers should all hook over the rod from the front. And yours should all hang facing the same way. Or is that too much to expect?"

The question required no answer and she offered none. But her lips quivered anew. He did not notice. Still shaking his head, he slipped into the jacket and, in front of the full length mirror, tugged at the ends of it until it hung without pulls or wrinkles. Then, satisfied, he started to turn away from the mirror and froze.

He was wearing brown shoes!

Stunned by the enormity of his discovery, he glared at her, his face crimson. "You put a pair of brown shoes among my black! If I'd gone out like this—"

But that was an eventuality that he did not even care to contemplate. Heavily, angrily, he reseated himself on the bed and began to tug the offending shoes from his feet. "Will you never learn to be neat? Can't you absorb *anything*? Brown shoes on *that* shelf. Black *below*. My shoes on *this* side, yours on *that*. How many times must I tell you?" His lips writhed, hurled his words at her like missiles. "This —house—must—be—neat!"

In a moment he would be shouting. He fought down the impulse, and mastered it.

"Yes, Arthur." Eleanor was shaking, great tears well-

ing from the corners of her eyes. When he bent to tie his shoelaces, she fled.

He let her go. Minutes later, when he came down for breakfast, he was himself again. Eleanor served him in silence and in silence he consumed what she set before him. He could even, before he left, set a lukewarm kiss on her forehead. Then he was gone.

Alone, Eleanor sat for more than an hour at the table, not touching the coffee that she had poured for herself. Despite all her efforts she was still trembling and eventually the tears came again. She wept quietly.

Afterward, her eyes were red when she kept her luncheon appointment. Such appointments were all that she had with which to fill her empty days and she had been looking forward to this one. But her attempt to conceal her tension when she sat in the restaurant was almost painfully transparent, particularly when, inevitably, the conversation turned to the subject of her marriage.

The woman opposite her—her name was Jane and she and Eleanor were old friends—spoke quite bluntly. "Why *did* you marry him, Eleanor?"

Eleanor, pretty in a new dress despite her reddened eyes, considered her reply for a long time. "Father had no money, and I had no abilities, no profession—what else could I do? Besides, he's very nice, really. Except . . ."

"Except for what?"

It was difficult to put it into words, to say it right out, but: "There's nothing I seem to be able to do for him—except keep his house tidy."

"You're not happy, then?"

"I didn't say that!" Instantly, Eleanor was defensive. But the woman who sat opposite her had known her too long and too well to be deceived.

"Of course you didn't." A hand patted Eleanor's comfortingly. "The first year is always the hardest, especially when the wife has no outside interests—" Jane broke off, struck by a thought. She was really fond of Eleanor and the poor dear certainly looked as

though she needed some sort of distraction. "I've got an idea. I'm attending a class in modern sculpture. Why don't you come along, learn to make something for him? Perhaps a birthday surprise."

"Make something? For Arthur?" Eleanor was recalling Critchit's lecture in the cellar. He liked to make things, too. Perhaps if she were to share in his hobby . . .

She smiled suddenly, brightly, a child again—a child who has offended an elder and has unexpectedly found the perfect way to make amends. "Why not?"

So it was that, a few days later, she hummed as she worked at Critchit's workbench. She had, surprisingly, managed to make considerable progress, and she was almost happy. The piles of rods, nuts, bolts, and assorted pieces of metal with which she had begun would, presently, make a quite presentable piece of modern sculpture. Critchit would be delighted—. The piping notes made by the cuckoo that suddenly popped out of the clock on the wall distracted her. Five o'clock? So soon? A glance at her wristwatch confirmed the hour. Critchit would be returning for dinner before too long and it would not do to have him discover her surprise before it was ready. It would not do at all.

Smiling, she carried the sculpture to a small curtain-covered alcove at the other end of the cellar and when she had drawn the curtain to conceal the sculpture, returned to the workbench. Carefully, painstakingly, she returned the bits of hardware that she had left on the bench to their respective jars. Every bolt and screw. Just as Critchit had taught her.

There! No signs of her labors remained. Even Critchit would have been pleased. Just as, she was certain, he would be pleased when she finally produced her completed gift. But that was yet to come. She made certain, in the days that followed, to give him no cause for complaint, and he had no inkling of what she was up to. In time, mollified by her at-

tention to the details of housekeeping, he became almost jovial. It was a full two weeks before he felt again the need to reprimand her.

It began on a Sunday, with his almost nightly ritual at the hi-fi. Critchit, on that day, had played his usual eighteen holes of golf and he had not bothered, on his return, to seek her out. He was in a mellow mood, and such a mood required music. From the garage, he had gone directly to the set in its rich walnut cabinet. Now, as he made his choice of records, he pursed his lips characteristically.

Beethoven again? No, his mood called for something lighter, more airy. Italian, perhaps. Yes. Carefully, he drew the proper record from the rack and just as carefully removed the record from its sleeve and then from its cover, holding it by its edges and by the hole at its center so that his fingers would not touch its surface. He had done the same thing a thousand times, but there was a satisfaction in it, in the rightness of it, that increased when he set the record on its turntable and, with a small brush, flicked away from its face and from the hi-fi needle the dust that was not really there. Even pressing the start button was a joy; the small, clean click that it made was a punctuation mark to a task well done.

Satisfied, he turned away from the set as the music filled the room, and saw Eleanor. She had been there all the time, a book on her lap, but she had watched in silence, not wanting to disturb him. He recognized the fact instantly and was pleased by that, too. So much so that when she started to her feet he stopped her with a gesture and smiled expansively.

"No, you sit right there, darling." Eleanor had really been a very good girl. She deserved a reward. "I'll get dinner. I used to do quite a lot of cooking for myself, you know. I'm quite a chef, actually."

For a moment she seemed about to protest—it was a wife's duty to prepare her husband's meals—but Critchit was already leaving the room. "You just relax," he said, and for once his smile was warm. Grateful for even so small a comfort, she settled back.

She could hear him, a little while later, in the kitchen. He was singing again, in time with the music, and his offkey baritone made her own smile a reflection of his. It was just as she had told Jane. Critchit was very nice, really. If he was sometimes short with her, well, that was just his way. A man had a right to his idiosyncrasies, didn't he? Everything would work out. All she had to do was keep Critchit happy and she would be happy, too.

And Critchit was, indeed, happy. Arrayed in a white apron and a chef's tall hat, he stood over the range and watched as the spaghetti that he had immersed in an oversized pot came to a boil. Beside it, a batch of mushrooms simmered in their saucepan as they sautéed in butter, almost done. Before turning to the vegetable cupboard behind him he shook the saucepan gently by its handle. Just once, to spread the butter evenly over them. It was near-sacrilege to poke mushrooms about as they cooked—ruined their flavor.

"Now, tomatoes."

There were asparagus, leeks, carrots, potatoes, onions. The cupboard was full almost to overflowing. But there were no tomatoes. Instantly, his mellow mood was gone. Not yet really angry, he turned to another cupboard, but with a pair of suddenly materialized lines etching vertical furrows between his eyes.

"Perhaps tomato puree—"

The second cupboard was stacked with row upon row of tins—neatly, as in a supermarket—but it contained no tomato purée. To make certain, he ran his finger along the neat rows. "Tomato ketchup, tomato soup . . ."

The finger halted. Where there should have been tomato puree there was empty space. His hand, when he took it away, was shaking. It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to hold his temper in check. But he had not yet reached the limits of his patience.

Spaghetti sauce would have to do. He was not overly fond of spaghetti sauce, but he had no choice.

At still another cupboard he ran his finger again along a row of tins.

"Curry, paprika, chili—" For the second time, his finger stabbed empty space. "Oh, my God."

There was, then, no denying the fury that welled up in him. It was in every line of his body, in his eyes, in his voice, when he shouted.

"Eleanor!"

He almost screamed the name, not knowing and not caring that the sound of it startled Eleanor so that she literally leaped from her chair and was already hurrying toward the kitchen even before he shouted it again. "*Eleanor!*"

Quaking, she remained standing just inside the kitchen door as he glared at her. Whatever her latest transgression, it was all too obviously unforgivable. Critchit was livid.

"No tomatoes, no tomato sauce, no spaghetti sauce, nothing." Each word was bitten off, his teeth clamping down on it savagely. He was no longer shouting. But this, this savage, clipped monotone, was even worse. The warm flush of happiness that had bathed her for a little while was gone and in its place was the old familiar tension that made her hands shake so that she clasped them together in front of her in an effort to keep them still.

"I must have forgotten." Vainly, even knowing that he would not accept it, she sought for some explanation, some extenuating circumstance, and found none.

"There's no excuse for forgetting."

Critchit's voice was heavy with accusation. Dramatically, accenting each motion he made, he swung wide the door of the cabinet beside which he stood. Affixed to the inner side of the door was a sheet of paper. Not looking at the paper, his eyes still fastened to hers, he went on.

"There's a list inside the door of this cupboard. There's a line on it for every item of every kind. And there's an eraser on the bottom shelf. When you use an item, all you have to do is erase a mark. There should never be an empty space." He paused, as if

for effect. But Eleanor was speechless, not knowing what she was expected to say.

Her dumb helplessness enraged him even more. "There are two marks here for tomato purée, three for spaghetti sauce. You haven't even bothered." He had been turning as he spoke, his hand sweeping to indicate the cupboard, and even as he spoke the hand brushed against the stacks of tins, upsetting them.

The crash that followed brought Eleanor out of her near-hypnosis as though it had been a gunshot. But for a moment, as tins bounced and rolled on the kitchen floor, she seemed unable to move, and when her muscles responded to her will at last she stepped forward like an automaton. On hands and knees, she began to gather up the tins.

Another man, seeing her so, might have felt at least a twinge of remorse; Critchit felt only his anger. The kitchen door, slamming behind him as he went out, rattled the room.

For the rest of the evening he did not speak to Eleanor. In time, finished in the kitchen, she sought him out and found him in the living room listening sourly to another record. But her overtures, her attempts to strike up a conversation, to make him speak —anything to lessen the feeling of guilt that gnawed at her—were fruitless. Eventually, still without speaking, he left the house and she guessed that he had gone out for his dinner, and that deepened her guilt still further.

He did not know, when he returned hours later, how she had spent those hours, how she had vowed that from this day on he would have no cause for complaint, Surly and unforgiving, he undressed and went to bed and in the morning left before she awoke. She was not really asleep, of course, but he did not guess that.

Nor would it have mattered if he had. Critchit was thoroughly disgusted. So much so that toward the end of the day, he had his secretary call Eleanor to tell her that he would not be home until late. Still

ruffled, he dined out and then attended a musical that he did not enjoy, and came home to find that she had already retired.

He did not look at her. Had he bothered, he would have seen that her pillow was wet with her crying. Instead, he went back downstairs to make certain that the latches on the doors and windows of the lower floor were all locked. To his surprise, they were. Eleanor had not forgotten. At least there was something to which she had given the proper attention.

Even so, he did not emerge from his black mood. In the morning, for once not splashing and singing, he showered in dour silence and returned to the bedroom to find Eleanor already up and out of the room. So she thought to escape him, did she? Well, he would see about that. Dressed and ready for the street, he came down the stairs to the living room like an avenging angel.

"Eleanor?"

The living room was unoccupied. His irritation growing again, he stared at it as if to materialize Eleanor by sheer force of will. It would be like her to hide, to have gone out in an effort to avoid facing him, to avoid the just consequences of her incompetence. When he found her . . .

His nostrils twitched. Eleanor had not gone out, after all. A tantalizing odor from the kitchen drew him like a magnet.

"Well!"

He could not, for a moment, believe his eyes. The kitchen, always spotless, positively gleamed. Counters and floor had been scrubbed and polished until they shone. And that was not all. Fresh coffee perked cheerily on the range, and on the table in the breakfast nook stood an array of dishes that delighted his gourmet's heart. Not just bacon and eggs, this time, but a breakfast fit for a king.

Eleanor, freshly made up and wearing a starched, pristine little apron, smiled at him. "Good morning,

dear." There was, still, a hint of uneasiness behind her smile, but the uneasiness vanished as he looked around the kitchen.

Critchit was honestly impressed. "You did all this?"

"Last night." Eleanor's smile seemed to be glued in place.

His answering smile was her reward. "How splendid. How absolutely splend—" Critchit did not complete the sentence.

"Is—is something wrong, dear?"

"Well, that remains to be seen, doesn't it?" Thoughtfully, Critchit crossed to the cupboard where the checklist hung, and opened it. The shelves inside were full, unmarred by empty spaces, and a number of new erasures had been made on the checklist. Delighted, he turned back to her. "All correct now, eh?"

At her nod, the last of the shadows fled from his eyes. Almost impulsively, he kissed her, and murmured, "Darling."

Eleanor was trying; he could afford to be magnanimous. And the breakfast she had prepared did look extraordinarily delicious.

It was. It was, in fact, superb. There was deep satisfaction in his voice as he spread his napkin on his lap and buttered his toast. "What a beautiful breakfast! And just when I need a good one, too. I've got a busy day ahead of me."

For a breath he paused, considered. Eleanor was watching him, pleased because he was pleased, but still a trifle tense, still a trifle apprehensive. His next words were her forgiveness. "I'll be home at six, though. As usual."

The tension in Eleanor relaxed. He could almost see it happen. Smiling, she served him, and smiling, saw him to the door and watched him drive off. The kitchen, when she left it later to return to her project, was in perfect order. Not a crumb, not a dish, not a speck marred its perfection. She *would* be a good wife. Her misery of the past two days forgotten, she could look forward again to the moment when she would present her surprise to Critchit and see the

pleasure come into his eyes. Her sculpture was close to completion now, and she could hardly wait.

But there was, of course, still a great deal that she had to do before that happy moment arrived. She had, despite all her efforts, found the project more difficult than she had anticipated, and the hours flew by unnoticed as she worked in the cellar. It was a shock, finally, when the cuckoo again chirped five times and she realized that most of the day was gone.

Frowning with concentration, the tip of her tongue protruding slightly from between her teeth, she examined what she had done. The latest rod that she had affixed to the sculpture was not set at quite the angle that she had wanted . . . Best to adjust it right now. It would only take a few minutes . . .

It was a mistake. She did not, in her concentration, hear the cuckoo chirp again an hour later, nor did she hear the sound of Critchit's car when he drove into the driveway at exactly the same moment.

Even as she worked, Critchit was entering the front door of the house. Ordinarily, she would have been there to greet him, but on this occasion, at least, he chose not to be irritated by the fact that she was not. Still glowing with the experience of the morning, he smiled and went to the kitchen. She was probably there, busy with his dinner. Not finding her in the kitchen made his smile a little crooked, set an edge to it, but when he returned to the living room he was still more puzzled than upset. She had to be somewhere. But where?

The cellar? The cellar door, he could see, was slightly ajar. But Eleanor rarely went down to the cellar . . . He took three steps down the cellar stairs, stopped on the fourth, and drew in his breath. His smile disappeared. Eleanor was doing something at the workbench. He could not see what it was that occupied her, but he could see the rest of the workshop clearly.

The workshop was a shambles. Nuts, bolts of metal, open jars, tools—all were scattered about with complete disregard for the order that until this

moment had been the hallmark of this, his private domain. It was almost—almost indecent! It would take hours to restore the shop to its previous state. Hours! And he had been fool enough to believe that he had at last made progress, that Eleanor had at last come to have at least some small understanding of the importance of neatness!

Purposely, wanting to startle her, he cleared his throat loudly. And he succeeded. Until that moment she had been completely unaware of him. Now, at the sound, she started violently and dropped the tools with which she had been working. Her face, when she turned toward him, was white with shock.

But Critchit no longer had eyes for her. His own eyes were fixed disbelievingly on the sculpture that sat on his workbench.

"What on earth is *that?*"

Fear, surprise, and a child's pride in a cherished accomplishment fought for dominance in her voice. The fear won.

"It—it's a surprise."

He came down the rest of the cellar stairs in silence, his unbelieving eyes still fixed on the sculpture.

"I'll say it is! What have you done to my workshop?"

Almost, she plucked at his sleeve, wanting him to look at her and not at the sculpture, wanting him to understand, and she did not dare. "I'm sorry, Arthur. I—I tidy it after each—"

He did look at her, then. And his look silenced her. "You mean that this has been going on for some time?"

Incredible. She was really incredible.

"Clear it up at once."

"But—"

"Yes?" Was she actually going to argue with him? "Yes? Well?"

Her reply made no sense to him. No sense at all. "I made it to try to please you. Arthur, don't be angry. I've been going to classes—"

"Classes! When you were supposed to be attending to really important things?" It was too much. It really was. He towered above her and as he spoke she looked away from his terrible eyes, let her chin drop until it was resting on her breast.

"Now you listen to me, my girl. This is my house. It has always been my house and I want it as it has always been—neat and tidy and exactly as I have been used to having it. You will please me by keeping everything in its proper place. Now take apart that horrible thing and put every bit back where it was."

Crushed, she did not move. It was as if she heard him from a distance, as if what he said were unreal. But it was real. He left no doubt of that when he turned on his heel and went back up the stairs, pausing only for a moment to look back.

"Well?"

Blinded again as so often before by her tears, she went to the workbench and began to return the bits and pieces that she had scattered everywhere to their jars. It took a long time, thanks to the shaking of her hands. Half a dozen times, pieces fell from her fingers but at last the workbench was clear except for the sculpture. Long after Critchit had vanished she began to dismantle it. This piece here, in this jar. This piece in that jar . . . Suddenly, she put her hands over her face and began to sob uncontrollably.

Critchit, when she finally went back upstairs, was not in the house, nor did she see him again the next morning. He was gone when she awakened. For once, she had slept deeply, soddenly, as though hiding from her unhappiness, but even finding herself alone was small solace. Critchit would return. Not bothering with coffee, she dressed and went about her chores like a sleepwalker. At least the chores were something to do, something to distract her from the inner trembling and uncertainty that would not let her be still, that made her hands quiver and her legs like jelly.

But by late afternoon she could find nothing more

that needed attention. Beaten down and frightened, she sat finally in a chair in the living room, not listening to the record that she had put on the hi-fi, an unread magazine lying on the floor at her feet, and stared at nothing. Never particularly attracted by liquor, she had mixed herself a drink that stood now on the table beside her. Automatically, she picked it up and then set it back on the table without drinking —and gasped.

She had set the drink back on the table itself instead of on its coaster and there was a wet ring on the polished wood! Frantic, she looked around the room for something with which to wipe away the telltale ring, and found nothing. Sobbing, she pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve. No use! Wipe as she would, the ring remained. And she could see the clock on the mantel—it was 5:45!

"He'll be *back* at six." The words were a moan.

Completely disorganized, she started toward the cellar door—somewhere in the cellar would be a container of furniture polish—and then, distracted, raced to the hi-fi. Critchit would be furious if he knew that she had touched his precious set! Thinking of that set her hands to trembling even more violently, so that the hi-fi needle, when she lifted the arm from the record, dropped from her grasp. It bounced on the record, screeched as it scratched across the black surface.

"His record! No. Oh, no!"

In the sudden silence she stood irresolute. Then, overwhelmed by panic, she fled. Out of the living room, down the cellar stairs . . .

A rag! She had to have a rag! There! There in the bin with the word RAGS lettered on it!

Now, polish. Dear God, where was the furniture polish? There was none! She was enmeshed in a nightmare, one of those terrifying dreams in which the sleeper is in mortal danger and can only move in slow motion. Except that this was not a nightmare, not a dream. It was real. Her mouth opened and closed. "Please. Oh, please."

At last! A bottle of furniture polish stood on a rack with other bottles. Clutching it and the rag, she flew back up the stairs. A few more moments, only a few more, and Critchit would be coming to the front door! In the living room, she scrubbed at the ring like a madwoman. It was stubborn, unyielding. But it faded. Little by little, little by little.

Done! It was done! No trace remained to mar the polished surface of the table. She was safe! She stepped back, sick with relief—and felt her heel touch the bottle of furniture polish that she had set down on the floor, saw the viscous liquid that gushed from its open mouth to spread in a widening puddle on the carpet.

"Oh, God!"

The rag could not soak up the puddle. The rag, wet and cold, was like a handful of worms. There had to be a way . . .

Moaning, she ran to where a small rug covered the floor at the door to the living room. Dragging it, she returned and flung it over the stain. Perhaps Critchit would not notice! Perhaps—

A hum brought her around with her hysterical eyes seeking. The hi-fi. She had forgotten to switch off the hi-fi. Turn it off! Quickly! Done! Close the cabinet, look around, make certain that nothing mars the order of the room—. The magazine. It still lay on the floor. Put it back. There . . . No, not that way, with its cover facing out! Critchit was insistent on that. Every magazine should sit in the rack with its cover facing toward his chair . . .

The nightmare was over. Everything was in its place. Sighing, she turned for one last look around the room, not knowing that she looked almost insane, that she was on the verge of collapse. For one brief moment her eyes cleared.

But only until, across the room from her, the picture crashed from the wall. The picture, like some prop in a movie, chose precisely that instant in which to pull its nail from the plaster, to smash down on the floor, to shatter its glass into a thousand shards.

She began to giggle hysterically. But she still fell to her knees, she still began to pick up the razor-sharp fragments with her bare hands so that she cut herself and blood ran from her palm, she still was able to look again at the clock on the mantel. 5:55. She had five minutes. Five minutes in which to re-hang the picture.

"A nail . . ."

God in heaven, where was the nail? She could not find it. And she would need a hammer. Muttering, sobbing, gasping, she ran again to the cellar stairs.

On the stairs she stumbled and almost fell, saving herself only by clutching at the stair rail, and then continued her near-drunken career the rest of the way down and so to the workbench. Blindly, not even really seeing it, she tore a hammer from its place among Critchit's other tools before running her hand shakily along the rows of jars on their shelves.

The first jar that she opened held nails that were almost the size of spikes. They would not do. And the next and the next contained nails that were too small.

Her mutterings and sobbings became a gurgle of pure frustration. It was as if fate itself were deliberately guiding her hands to the wrong jars, as if she were *meant* to be discovered! It wasn't fair! It wasn't right! Her gurgle became a moan. Her hands would no longer obey her, they seemed to have acquired a crazy, shaking life of their own. After what seemed an eternity and was only seconds, she found the proper jar and tugged at it—only to find that it was wedged in between its companions on right and left.

What followed was inevitable. The shelves, heavily laden, were easily unbalanced. Only a little effort was required to pull them off their center of gravity, and she was, in her fear, exerting every ounce of her strength. As if in a continuation of her waking nightmare she saw the shelves tip toward her, totter precariously for a moment, and then continue downward, gathering speed as they fell.

The crashing explosion of the jars on the concrete cellar floor seemed to sound in her head rather than

at her feet. Instinctively, not even knowing that she did so, she had stepped back out of harm's way. But the explosion drove the last ounce of self-control from her mind, tore into shreds what little sanity she still possessed.

For a few hysterical moments she tried, again on her knees, to make some order out of the chaos. But it was no good. There was no time—and there was still in her that nagging fear that was now all that motivated her. There was something she had to do, to find. There was some reason why she had come down here . . .

The picture!

The chaos was no longer her primary concern. A nail in one fist and the hammer in the other, her legs carrying her unsteadily, she ran back up the cellar stairs.

And it was there—suddenly, unexpectedly, terrifyingly—that a pair of hands seized her. The hands were there, waiting, as she emerged from the cellar, and the touch of them wrenched an involuntary cry from her open mouth, almost stopped her wildly beating heart.

"Eleanor!"

The hands belonged to Critchit. Critchit, who stood now with angry spots of color burning in his cheeks, with fury in his eyes and with accusation in every line of his stance as he stared past her through the open cellar door at the mess below.

"I—I wanted to hang a picture. I came down here for a nail—"

Her lips formed the words, but she was only vaguely aware that she spoke. The words were reflex, no more. And they were wasted. Critchit was the very epitome of outrage, the *ne plus ultra* of shocked indignation, an all too real manifestation of everything that she had come to dread.

"You've upset my whole house! Can't you do *anything* neatly! Can't you? Can't you do anything neatly?! *Can't you do anything neatly?!*"

Critchit wanted to shake her, to slap her. But he

did neither of those things. She did not give him the opportunity. Her wild, howling, insane scream was the last thing he heard. The hammer that she held was the last thing he saw. Frozen, unable to stir, he saw her arm lift, saw the hammer sweep downward and grow incredibly larger as it approached his head.

The hammer struck him squarely between the eyes. It compressed the bone of his forehead, squeezed his eyes out of their sockets, plunged on. It etched an invisible spiderweb of cracks in his skull, drove splinters of bone into his brain, and then smashed what was left of his brain into a mass of dead gray matter into which blood seeped as if into a bowl of porridge. He managed a single scream, a mate to Eleanor's, and then he was no more.

Carefully, holding it by the extreme end of its handle, Eleanor carried the hammer back downstairs, took a rag from the bin, and wiped the hammer spotlessly clean. Then, when she had returned the hammer to its proper place, she turned her attention to the rest of the workroom. It really was a mess. Humming, she set about putting it to rights.

The cellar was in perfect order again when she sat by the workbench hours later and talked to the police inspector. He had come in answer to her call, together with two policemen, and one of the policemen stood now beside her and the other at the head of the cellar stairs, but it was to the inspector that she spoke. He was a very understanding man.

"And that's how it happened," she said, and looked about her, satisfied. "He said I couldn't do anything neatly. But I showed him. I cleaned up everything when I was finished—all neat and tidy. A place for everything and everything in its place."

Despite himself, the inspector shuddered when she began to laugh. The laugh was incongruous issuing from the lips of a young woman who somehow managed even now to look like a little girl—an insane, cackling laugh without rhyme or reason. It made his hair stand on end.

But Eleanor had no inkling of that. She was still

laughing when she turned her head so that she could see the jars that she had so carefully returned to their shelves. Every broken jar had been replaced, and in her pleasure at a task well done she did not even hear when the inspector walked to the jars and made a small, retching sound and turned away, unable to look at them.

She had done a really excellent job. Critchit would have been proud of her. It was all *very* neat. She had even made up a set of labels for the new jars. The contents of each of the jars could be readily identified by her small, childish script: *Heart, Small Intestines, Large Intestines, Lungs, Fingers, Toes, Pancreas, Ears, Nose . . .*

9

The artist's smiling, sunburned face swam vaguely before Critchit, so that he brushed a hand over his eyes, not recollecting for the moment where he was. Then, remembering, his own face went stiff. The artist's smile was as derisive as his own had been earlier.

The artist, enjoying his discomfiture, lit a cigarette and tossed his dead match on the table. "And *are* you neat and tidy?"

"No more than any other man." Ill at ease, Critchit picked up the dead match and dropped it into an ashtray and was unaware that the unconscious gesture made the artist's smile the wider.

He was no longer thinking of the artist, in any case. "And yet—"

"Yet what?" Rogers, at least, was not smiling.

Critchit shrugged. This was all nonsense. "It's nothing. Just a recurrent dream."

"But why that?" The artist, tenacious, clung to his advantage. "Why that particular—nightmare?"

Blast the man, he was being deliberately obnoxious. Critchit's temper, controlled though it was, sounded in his voice. "It's not my nightmare you're really concerned about, is it? It's yours."

So venomously was it said that the artist recoiled.

But it was Critchit's turn, now, to be tenacious. "What about *your* story?"

"My story . . ." The artist spoke under his breath, hesitantly, as though marshaling his thoughts. And those thoughts mirrored themselves in his eyes. His eyes were suddenly hard. "Mine begins on an island. A tropical island. The island of Haiti . . ."

10

Each thud of the distant drum seemed to Moore to be an exclamation point accenting the bitterness that, despite all his efforts, persisted in permeating his thoughts. Usually, the drum sounded only after dark, but this time it had begun early in the morning and continued throughout the day—a faint but insistent beat that whispered of the black magic and the macabre voodoo rituals that visitors to Haiti so avidly sought and so rarely found.

Frowning, he cocked an ear toward the far-off booming, annoyance momentarily replacing his concentration, and set down his brush and palette. Just outside the door of the hut he listened again, ignoring the perfume of wild orange and lemon trees and the other, ranker, smells of the jungle that assailed his nostrils. Once, when he had first arrived in Haiti, he had been fascinated by its smells and by the strangeness of it, but that had been before he had settled in the jungle. He was more aware, now, of the mosquitoes and the scorpions and the spiders and the blowflies that made living here an agony. His hut was only a few miles from the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, a city as jammed with humanity as any *white* man's metropolis, but it might as well have been on the moon.

When the drum fell suddenly silent, he paused for a moment to stare at the hut in disgust.

Set down in a small clearing, the hut was at once his haven and his private hell, his studio and his prison. From the outside, except for the empty food tins that he had carelessly scattered everywhere, it resembled any other native dwelling. Palm-roofed, with walls of interwoven branches and vines, it made a perfect hiding place for rats and for a hundred varieties of Haitian vermin. Inside, it was littered, sparsely furnished with a rickety table, a chair, a cot, and a few shelves—but inside, at least there were traces of color to relieve the jungle's interminable green. The paintings that he had done leaned against the leafy walls of the hut, glowing.

Moore ignored them. It was the painting on the easel in the center of the hut, a self-portrait, that drew him back inside. His brush had caught exactly the bitterness in his eyes and the tight lines of his mouth, and when he had contemplated the portrait critically for a while, he nodded. Imbued with sudden new impetus, he studied his face in the mirror that he had set up beside the easel and began to work quickly and surely. The portrait was good, damn good, and all his old-time fascination with his craft, all the old-time enthusiasm, came flooding back so that he forgot time, forgot where he was. Until, at last, the light began to fail and he stepped back from the easel to study what he had done. Another touch of the brush set a tiny highlight in precisely the proper place.

"Almost finished." He had stepped back again, and he spoke aloud. Paint-stained and unshaven, lonely and isolated, he had fallen easily into the habit of holding one-sided conversations with himself and he was not even aware of his own voice. "My best piece of work."

But if he was not aware of his voice, he could not ignore the thoughts that came crowding in on him. His face twisted, became a grim mask. When he

flung his palette onto the table the gesture was only a small indication of the helpless anger that so rarely left him in peace. "And what's the use? It'll be laughed at, criticized, considered worthless, like all my work!"

His expression changed, became almost savage as he stepped toward the painting. But the small palette knife that he picked from the table as he moved forward remained unused. Someone, a man, had appeared at the open door of the hut and was watching him curiously. A man who looked vaguely familiar and completely out of place in his well-cut sports clothing and highly polished shoes.

"Don't you recognize me, Frank?"

The man's voice, too, was vaguely familiar. Something clicked in Moore's brain and he had a momentary mental picture of an art show held an eternity ago in London, of cocktails and sleek art patrons.

Of course! "Bob! Bob Dickson!" Dickson had been the owner of the gallery where the show had taken place and they had met and liked each other and seen a great deal of each other before circumstances intervened to keep them apart. "But what are you doing here?"

"I had some business in Port-au-Prince and heard your name mentioned in a bar." Dickson was staring at him with only partially concealed wonder. Moore bore little resemblance to the eager young artist he had known in London. "May I come in?"

"Of course."

Inside, not bothering now to conceal his curiosity, Dickson looked around, puzzled. "Strange to find you out here. Any special reason? I thought you'd be in the south of France, rolling in money."

"Money?" Now, it was Moore's turn to be puzzled. "I've been here for quite a while. I tried living in the city for a time, but what little cash I had didn't last very long. Where would I get money?"

"Your paintings. I saw one sold a few weeks ago. It brought five thousand pounds. If that isn't money, what is?"

"Five—thousand?" Moore's voice was a gasp. "One of my paintings?" His mind wrestled with the information, could not quite grasp its import. "Sold by whom?"

"Why, Arthur Gaskill sold it at his gallery on behalf of Lawrence Diltant."

At mention of the names, the bitterness in Moore's eyes deepened, but what he had heard still made no sense. There had to be more to what Dickson was telling him. "But why such a price?"

"You don't know?" Dickson was honestly astonished. "Your pictures have been highly praised lately. By no less an art critic than Fenton Breedley. You're quite the rage these days."

"Fenton—" Moore's bitterness was suddenly alive, writhing across his face, naked and ugly. Yet somehow, he managed to control himself. "Do you know why I came out here?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Why?"

Moore's bitterness broke free, spilled over. When he spoke, it was through his teeth. "Three reasons. You just mentioned them all. It was Fenton Breedley, the art *critic,* who said my work was worthless, who convinced the world that I was an amateur. It was Arthur Gaskill, the art *dealer,* who said he couldn't sell any of my pictures. And so kind-hearted Lawrence Diltant, the famous art *collector,* bought up every painting I had in my studio—cheaply—just to do me a favor. He gave me just enough money to come here, buy some paints and canvases, and start all over again."

"I see."

"Do you?" The sudden intensity in Moore's words made Dickson look at him sharply. Suddenly, too, Moore was laughing. Short, barking laughs that had nothing of humor in them. "And all this time I've been hiding here in this hole, despising myself, trying to convince myself that I did have talent—eating my heart out because three experts told me that I was wasting my efforts, that my work had no value. Living on canned beans, eaten alive by mosquitoes—"

"Oh, come on, Frank." Dickson had retreated a step. Moore looked like a madman. "You don't think —why, you make it sound like a conspiracy."

But Moore was not listening. Moore's eyes had slitted, his mouth had set hard. Somewhere in the jungle the drum had again taken up its insistent beat and it seemed to be pounding in time with the angry beating of his own heart.

Dickson touched his shoulder. "Frank?"

"Eh?" Moore had started at the touch. "Oh. I was just thinking . . ."

"Yes? Thinking what?"

"About Breedley and Gaskill and Diltant." Moore spoke the names as though they had the taste of worms. "Can you lend me some money? You'll get it back, and lots more. I promise."

"Why, I suppose so. I don't have much with me. How much do you need?" Another question trembled on Dickson's tongue—a question that he had no real right to ask and that he asked anyway. "And what for?"

Moore's reply was ridiculous. But it sent a chill down his spine.

"To buy my revenge. With voodoo."

"You're joking."

Moore's shrug admitted nothing, denied nothing. "Perhaps. But I still need the money. Can you let me have it?"

From a pocket, Dickson produced his wallet and handed over most of its contents. "Will this do?"

"For a start, anyway. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, why don't you show me what you've done since I saw you last? I'd like—"

"Some other time." Moore's voice was clipped, hurried. There was no mistaking his gratitude, but neither was there any mistaking his sudden desire to be alone. "You've done me a great favor and I appreciate it. But, forgive me, but there's something I have to do. Something important. I'd offer you a drink before you go—if I had one to offer. But . . ."

"I understand." Dickson did not understand. But

Moore had left him little choice. "I'd better be going."

Moore was lost in thought again.

"Well, goodbye." Hurrying, suddenly eager to be gone, Dickson left the hut. There was something about Moore that was disturbing, almost frightening.

Alone in the now near-complete darkness, Moore stood for a long time without moving. Unaware that he did so, he took up the palette knife from where he had dropped it on the table and fingered it until, presently, he was holding it clamped in his fist like a dagger. When he struck savagely downward the knife penetrated deep into the wooden table top and remained there, quivering. The drying paint on its blade looked like drying blood.

Not troubling to lock the door of the hut, he went out and walked along a trail to the dirt road that cut through the jungle not far away from the clearing, the road that had brought Dickson. But he did not follow the road in the direction that Dickson had driven, toward Port-au-Prince; his destination lay in the opposite direction.

In time, when he had walked for perhaps a half hour, he left the road and plunged again into the jungle. There was another trail here and eventually it led him to a tiny native village, the booming of the drum growing louder in his ears as he neared the cluster of huts.

In the early days, he had several times visited the village out of curiosity. This time, his walk was more purposeful. Ignoring the villagers who stared at him as he passed, he walked to the hut that stood at the far end of the village street. Larger than the others, it stood alone, its entrance flanked by poles from which hung the feathered fetishes that identified it. Only a *houngan,* a voodoo priest, displayed such fetishes, and the people of the village kept a respectful distance as he approached it. Even the mongrels that yapped at his heels fell back at last, as though they too were aware that this was forbidden ground.

Minutes later, he was seated with the *houngan* on the dirt floor of the hut, sweating. Despite Haiti's

eternally warm climate a fire blazed on a crude hearth in the center of the hut. Suspended from a tripod, hung a blackened cauldron filled with some thick, boiling liquid, that added clouds of steam to the already oppressively thick atmosphere.

The *houngan* listened to him in silence and then, still silent, poked at the fire with a stick. Fat and middle-aged, his ebony skin gleaming, he looked more like a native housewife than a sorcerer. Only his eyes hinted that he might be more than he seemed; they were sharp, alight with intelligence.

"So you wish to buy voodoo?"

Moore nodded. Before coming to the village he had been tense, keyed up, driven by a cold rage that blotted out everything else. Now that he was here, the beginnings of doubt had begun to erode away his resolve. Still, he nodded.

"To get revenge on people who wronged you?"

Another nod. Impatient, this time. They had already been over his reason for coming. But the *houngan* would not be hurried. "You say you are artist? You make good pictures?"

What had ever possessed him to think that what he sought could be found here? "I think so."

The stick that had been poking at the fire came to a halt, drew aimless symbols in the dirt floor.

"Put the hand you paint with into fire."

So casually was it said, so without emphasis, that for a moment Moore did not comprehend. "What?"

The *houngan* touched the cauldron with his stick. The tip of the stick, when it touched the almost red hot metal, sent up a small puff of smoke. "Put the hand you paint with into pot."

"In there?" Moore's eyes, suddenly wide, were fixed on the thick liquid in the cauldron—a miniature volcano with molten lava seething in its depths. His head shook from side to side. "No. I—I couldn't." Without realizing it, he had gotten to his feet and was edging back from the fire.

"You want voodoo. You must do it." The *houngan*

was not insistent, but his eyes were twin black blades stabbing into Moore's.

"I can't! I'd never be able to paint again!" Moore almost turned to leave the hut. This was insane. Whatever was in the cauldron, it would boil the flesh from his hand. Thinking that, he forgot his purpose in coming here, forgot everything except the painting that was all that he had lived for for so long.

The *houngan's* voice made him remember. "You want revenge." The *houngan's* eyes were bottomless pools in which he could see the faces of Gaskill and Breedley and Diltant. Faces that were twisted into mocking, knowing smiles, that laughed at him.

It was the faces that decided him, that resolved the struggle within him. To be able to wipe the sneers from those faces was worth any sacrifice, no matter how great. Aware that the *houngan* was watching him, he made his decision. Suddenly, not giving himself time to think, he plunged his hand into the slowly boiling liquid, his own eyes shut and his teeth gritted against the searing pain that would surely follow.

There was no pain. Amazed, he opened his eyes and gaped down at the cauldron. The thick, lava-like substance that lapped against his skin heaved itself into small bubbles that burst and sent up small spouts of steam, but that was all. There was no sensation of heat, no shriek of protest from scalded nerve endings.

Gradually, his look of stoic expectation became a look almost of arrogance. His hand, when he took it from the cauldron, had not even turned pink.

"Now what? Do I get a doll to stick pins into?"

The *houngan's* eyes did not leave him. "No." Why was it that the white men who came to him were almost always fools who pretended to scorn the very thing for which they had come? "You are artist. You can draw. You do not need doll. Now, go."

"That's all? That's all there is to it?"

The *houngan* did not reply.

Disappointed, Moore wiped his hand on his trouser leg and dug in a pocket for the money that Dickson had given him. But the *houngan* did not reach for the notes that he offered; a gesture indicated that the money was to be left on the floor. Other than that, it was as if he had already forgotten Moore. But he had not forgotten. His eyes, as he watched Moore leave the hut, were softer. He was still shaking his head sadly, almost pityingly, when Moore was gone.

But Moore knew nothing of that. No longer buoyed up by the rage that had brought him, he felt like an idiot. The hate still burned in him but his experience with the *houngan* had left him empty, purposeless. Impressive as the *houngan's* demonstration had been, it had not provided him with a weapon. Weary and more bitter than ever, he sought his cot later and dreamed angry dreams that left him in the morning with a sour taste in his mouth and a sense of futility that ate at him like a cancer.

Not even his self-portrait could hold his interest the next day. The portrait, almost completed, needed only a few more judicious brush strokes, but when he had applied those strokes he did not feel the surge of satisfaction that he usually felt when he had finished a painting. Aimless, he set down his palette and brush and took up a pad and pencil.

But the lines that he drew on the pad were as aimless as his mood. Seeking a subject, something with which to distract himself, he began to sketch, taking for a model a chipped vase in which he sometimes stored his brushes. For a few moments the vase held his attention and he sketched rapidly. Then that too palled. His pencil tapping on the table, he stared at the vase and past it, not really seeing it.

"I must have been crazy to think I could get revenge with voodoo."

That thought and no other filled his mind. Still aimless, he looked down at the sketch he had drawn and wagged his head. The sketch, expert though it was, looked to him like the work of a novice. Dissatisfied, he ripped the page from the pad and tore it in

half and then in half again. Every line of his body mirrored disgust as he turned to throw the pieces into the large empty tin that stood by his cot and that served him as a wastebasket. He *was* an idiot. Only an idiot would waste time and money on anything as asinine as voodoo . . .

The sudden crash behind him made him spin on his heel like a dancer, startled and alert and with the torn pieces of paper still in his hand. The vase was no longer on the table. Somehow, it had fallen to the floor. But it had not shattered. It had broken—but into four nearly equal sized pieces that lay now at his feet.

Even the *houngan* had not inspired in him the horror-tinged awe that dropped his mouth open and brought beads of perspiration to his forehead. What he was seeing was coincidence. It had to be coincidence. Or did it?

His hand shaking, he lifted the four pieces of paper until they were level with his eyes. Each bore on its face a portion of the sketch that he had made—and each portion of the sketch exactly matched one of the four shards of pottery that lay on the floor. The thought that clamored in his head was impossible. But there was a way to make certain. If voodoo really existed, he had his weapon! He could have his revenge!

The thought was heady wine, but he did not give way to it. Not yet. Deliberately, he went to the bread bin that stood on a shelf and took from it a loaf of bread that he had placed in the bin only the previous morning and that was already edged with mold. The slice that he cut from the bread he placed on the floor. The textured whiteness of it—he was still the artist—made an interesting contrast with the hard-packed earth on which it lay. Working carefully, he made a sketch of the slice, reproducing it exactly, and when he had completed his drawing, took up an eraser. One corner of the sketch vanished as he rubbed the eraser back and forth across it.

Not knowing what to expect, but eager, fascinated,

he stood above the slice of bread and waited. If he was right, if there really was such a thing as voodoo . . .

There was. He heard the rustling behind him, but he did not turn, and so he did not see the tiny, twitching nose that presently poked itself out from a crevice in the wall of the hut. He had eyes only for the bread, and he did not turn even when there was a sound of scraping and a stubby gray body emerged from the crevice and moved, tentatively at first and then with a hungry rush, toward the meal that awaited it. The first knowledge he had that he was not alone came when a huge rat, whiskers trembling, ran between his legs and pounced on the bread.

"It works," he breathed disbelievingly, then. And then, again, as he slammed the pad exuberantly on the table, "It works!"

Frightened, the rat darted away, vanished into its hole. But it had left the slice of bread. It had had time enough only to devour one corner of the white square —the same corner that Moore had so carefully erased. Bread and sketch were again a perfect match.

The horror that took him again was, this time, more than a mere tinge; it gripped him like a vise. But it did not last. Awe-struck as he was, he could still think, and the triumph that presently filled him wiped away the horror, wiped away everything but the thoughts that had brought him to this moment.

In time, he left off staring at the bread and let his eyes wander to the self portrait that he had only just completed.

"I wonder . . ."

He did not complete the sentence. Wondering would not dissolve away the last little pinpoint of doubt that still pricked at his brain. From among the paint tubes scattered on the table he selected one and squeezed a bit of its contents onto his palette. Bright crimson, it stood out like a real wound when he painted in a small nick on one cheek of the portrait.

Now, he had only to wait again. Minutes ticked off. And—nothing. Nothing except that he felt suddenly

tired. So tired that he rubbed his eyes, yawning. He had slept badly and the excitement of the last few minutes had intensified his weariness; all at once, he could not keep his eyes open.

The portrait would keep. Hardly knowing that he did so, he picked up the broken vase and threw it into the wastebasket and then stretched himself on his cot. Almost instantly, he was asleep. He slept for hours, until the sun had climbed across the sky and the hut was dark. But even then, he did not awaken.

The booming of the drum was what roused him, finally. But not all at once. At first, just after sunset, the drum sounded only softly, so that it seemed to invade his subconscious, to become a part of him, a part of the rhythm of his being. His head began to move from side to side, keeping time with the drum-beats—slowly, then faster and faster as the pace of the drumming increased, until his entire body was jerking, heaving. Lips parted, eyes wide open though he still slept, he lurched wildly, fell from the cot, and came back to full consciousness to find that he had upset the wastebasket and that he was lying face down amid the broken fragments of the vase.

It was the sharp-edged fragments of the vase, even before he felt the sharp pain in his cheek, that told him what had happened. Yet for a moment he was afraid, hesitant; it needed all his will to make him lift a hand to his face, to touch a finger to the pain in his cheek.

The finger came away wet with blood.

Shaking anew, he fumbled with his lantern, lit it, and then went to the mirror beside his easel. Standing stiffly, he looked from the mirror to his self portrait and then back again. The faces in the mirror and in the portrait were identical. Even to the small nick on one cheek. His fear left him and he began to smile. And the smile, in the harsh light of the lantern, made him look like a death's head.

For the rest of that night he remained awake, gloating and making plans. He had no doubts, now. He had his weapon. The fates had relented at last

and now it was his turn. Only one more thing was needed to arm him completely. Money. He would need quite a large sum . . .

But the fates had done more than merely relent. It was as if, in the space of a single day, his fortunes had made a complete about face. In the morning, Dickson stood again in the hut and smiled at him and dropped a thick sheaf of banknotes on the table.

"I'm leaving Haiti this afternoon, so I thought—"

Moore did not really care what he thought. Moore gathered up the banknotes and nodded. "This will get me back to London. Then you'll get it back. With interest. Thanks."

The rest of their conversation, at least to Moore, was meaningless. Preoccupied, he was polite, no more, and Dickson eventually took his leave. And with his going, Moore held up the sheaf of notes as though it were a sword and breathed his words like a prayer: "At last!"

Three days later, wearing a new suit that fitted him only poorly and carrying the self-portrait in a leather portfolio, he was in London. Trafalgar Square, as he crossed it, was an explosion of traffic and noise and people as familiar to him as his own hand but he paid no attention to it. It was not out of homesickness, not out of any burning desire to see again familiar sights and hear again familiar sounds that he had come home. The desire that burned in him was deeper than that; it was a crusade, an obsession. If he saw the crowds at all it was only to move carefully aside as passersby brushed against him, wary lest some damage come to the painting under his arm.

At a building that fairly reeked of success and money he paused to take a deep breath and then went in. Minutes later he was in a plush office, seated in a deep chair with his portfolio resting on the floor beside him, and face to face with the three men who had drawn him back across an ocean. Three men whose smug self-assurance enveloped them like an aura, who listened, smiling, as he talked. He talked for a long time. But the meat of all that he had to say,

the gist of it, was summed up in his final sentence: "You cheated me."

Diltant, the collector, a millionaire many times over and with a millionaire's easy belief in the rightness of his own actions, spoke for his companions as well as for himself.

"You cheated yourself. If you had any faith in your work you wouldn't have listened to what Fenton said about your paintings or what Arthur said about their saleability—and you wouldn't have sold them to me for the price you did."

His clipped, impatient tone dismissed any suggestion of wrongdoing, of guilt, so that Moore felt an impulse to leap at him, to smash his smug face.

But—softly, softly.

"You were all in it together."

Gaskill's grin was infuriating. Ever the merchant, he spoke in the unctuous tones that had become a habit with him and that had made his gallery one of the most successful in England—but with an inflection that was meant to sting, to hurt. "That's the way of the world—you buy cheap and sell dear."

Moore ignored the grin, and let his eyes rest on Breedley. Breedley, whose syndicated column and frequent television appearances could lift an artist to the heights or smash his career like a house of cards.

"And pay a critic to tell lies so you can do it. No, you cheated me, all three of you, and I'm going to get revenge."

"How?" Diltant, bored, made a steeple of his fingers.

"With voodoo."

That, whatever else they might have expected, took them by surprise. But the surprise did not last. It changed almost at once. Amused, they looked at each other and then back at Moore. Again, he felt the impulse to leap up, to batter his fists against those smiling, well-barbered, self-assured faces. They were laughing at him. Just as they must have been laughing behind his back even as they robbed him. Just as they must have been laughing when they de-

stroyed his dreams, when they pocketed the profits that were rightfully his.

His hate rose in his throat like vomit. Damn them! Damn them all! Let them laugh! It would not be for long! Shaking, he took up his portfolio and left the office, slamming the door hard behind him. But this blind, insane rage would not do. What he had planned would require steady hands. On the street, he stopped to compose himself. There. Better.

Calm again, he hailed a cab that took him away from the bustle of the Square and pulled up, finally, on the street that had been home to him before his departure for Haiti. The street was not as he remembered it. Tall new apartment buildings now hemmed in the drab four-story lodging house that was his destination but he paid no attention. The new buildings did not concern him until he stood with the landlord of the rooming house in a studio on the top floor.

The studio, still as Spartan as it had been when he left it, was bright with the sunlight admitted by a slanting skylight set into its ceiling. But even as they entered, a shadow fell across the skylight.

Moore, his eyes on the skylight, hardly heard the landlord say, "I was glad your old studio was available. It's nice to have you back."

"It's nice to be back." The words were the proper ones, but Moore's attitude belied them. "What's that?"

"That?" The landlord's eyes followed his to the skylight. "Oh. I'm afraid you'll find that things have changed quite a bit since you were here last."

"Changed?"

The landlord stepped directly under the skylight and looked up. "See for yourself."

When he had himself stepped under the skylight, Moore could see what the landlord saw. One of the new buildings to which he had paid so little attention reared its height directly beside the lodging house. High above, a sign painter on a swaying scaffold concentrated on the sign that he was painting on its rear wall. It was the shadow of the scaffold that he had seen on the skylight.

"Is something wrong?" The landlord had noticed his frown.

"No—no, nothing." For a moment, the sign painter had posed a possible problem and Moore's face had reflected the thought. But another quick look reassured him. He could see the sign painter quite clearly but there was no way in which the man could see any part of the studio except for the small space directly below the skylight. So long as he kept the work that he intended to do well away from that space it would be invisible from above.

"I sent some things. Have they arrived?"

"They're all here." The landlord waved to indicate three easels, a small stack of blank canvases, and several cartons. "And I bought the safe exactly as you said in your letter."

"Fine." Until that moment Moore had not seen the small black safe that squatted in a corner of the room.

"Here's the combination." The landlord handed him a slip of paper.

"Thanks."

"Well, welcome home." The landlord turned to the door. "If you need anything—"

"I'll let you know."

Need anything? Even now, that could bring a smile to Moore's face. Everything that he needed was right here. Everything! And when the landlord had gone, he lost no time in putting it to use.

The first order of business was his self portrait. His one prized possession, it would one day be his passport to all that he had missed. His eyes glowed with pride as he took it from the portfolio and locked it carefully away in the safe. Then the glow was replaced by a different kind of glow, a glow that only hinted at what seethed inside him.

"And now—"

From the stack of canvases he chose three and set them upon the easels, well away from the skylight. A few minutes later, when he had mixed his paints, he went to work.

There had been other times in his life when the

sheer drive of creativity had kept him at his easel for days on end, but those other times had been no more than preludes. This time, it was more than creativity that drove him. Each stroke of his brush was another nail in the coffins of his enemies and he worked, first by daylight and then by electric light, without taking time for sleep or nourishment.

Fenton Breedley's portrait was first, then Gaskill's, and finally, Diltant's. It took days in which to complete them, days in which his cheeks went hollow and his stomach clamored for food, but in an amazingly short time, he was done. On an evening a week after he had begun, he could stand back and stare at the three completed portraits with deadly satisfaction.

There was no haste to his movements when he put aside his brushes and picked up his palette knife. This was a moment to be savored, to be enjoyed. Carrying the knife, he went to stand before the portrait of Breedley.

"You saw my pictures and lied about them to the public," he said, and his voice was almost a caress. "Now, Mr. Art Critic, you'll never see another picture again."

The calm that he had imposed upon himself was gone. Only his hate remained. Hate that raised his arm, that drove the palette knife through the left eye of the portrait and then the right, that made him stab again and again until where there had been eyes there was only shredded canvas.

Panting, he stepped away from the canvas at last and felt something almost like fulfillment. Only one thing could have added an iota of pleasure to the moment. If only he could see for himself when Breedley's fate overtook him, if only he could know beyond the shadow of a doubt that he had succeeded . . .

But he need not have been concerned. Far away, in the bedroom of a lavish apartment that overlooked Hyde Park, Fenton Breedley's eyes—the eyes that had been obliterated from his portrait—were for once placating. For once, he was not the self-assured

celebrity. For once, he did not speak, but listened. He had been listening for some time. To his wife. A handsome, usually quiet woman, she had been raging at him for minutes and her face was contorted, marred by the streaks of mascara that her tears had carried down her cheeks.

"How long have you been seeing her!" It was not really a question; it was an accusation, flung like a stone.

Trapped, Breedley said nothing. These women! He had always been able to do just about as he pleased with his wife. But she had him dead to rights . . .

"Why did you need someone else?"

As if there could be an adequate answer to that! She was hysterical. In a moment, she would be screaming. And he detested scenes, detested tears. The smile that he gave her was meant to charm, and it made him look like a shark. "Look, darling, be sensible. This—what I've done—it doesn't mean that I don't love you. But we're living in the twentieth century. It was just—"

She was not listening. She was beyond listening. As he spoke, he had moved forward and she had moved back. She stood now beside her dressing table and as he talked her fingers were groping among the things on the table and her face was wild.

"What's that?"

The bottle that she had picked up contained a colorless liquid that splashed about as she drew the stopper. It looked harmless, innocuous, and yet something, some instinct, warned him when her arm lifted. Something shouted to him to turn away, to escape—too late.

He had only half-turned when she screamed, "You'll never see another woman again, and they won't want to see you!" and flung the contents of the bottle into his face.

For an instant he felt only the coolness of it. Then, suddenly, his face was on fire. Suddenly, he was shrieking in agony, his hands clasped over his eyes that were no longer there, that had bubbled for an

instant and then dissolved, burned away. Suddenly, acid fumes were seeping from between his fingers and ugly red wounds were springing into being under his hands as the acid trickled down from his empty eye sockets . . .

. . . eye sockets that looked exactly like the shredded, gouged out eye sockets in the painting at which Moore stared so intently, the palette knife still gripped in his fist.

Smiling his tight smile, Moore dropped the knife and moved a step to the right, there to contemplate the second of the three portraits that he had created.

"Arthur Gaskill, art dealer. You lied to me. You told me that my pictures were worthless and that you couldn't handle them. Well, you'll never handle another—or anything else."

The paint that he squeezed onto a brush a moment later was dead white. Gaskill's hands vanished from the portrait, painted out, as he applied the dead white pigment to the canvas.

And at exactly the same instant, in his gallery on the other side of town, Gaskill emerged from his office into the gallery's workroom and glared at one of his employees. The employee was using the workroom's matt-cutter, and he was far from expert. Several matts, ruined beyond repair, lay at his feet.

Gaskill swore under his breath. "No, that's not the way. You're doing it all wrong."

"Sir?"

"The cutter, you fool. That isn't the way to use it. Here, I'll show you."

Annoyed, he shoved the man aside, set a new matt on the board and then, holding the matt in place with both hands, turned to explain his procedure. He did not see the heavy blade of the cutter slip from its latch and slam suddenly downward. Alerted by the startled widening of the employee's eyes, he had only time enough to turn back, to open his mouth, before the blade knifed through his wrists and left him gaping at the bloody stumps where his hands had been. The pain that followed an instant later opened his

mouth wider, gave birth to a bloodcurdling scream. On the floor, his hands writhed once, twice, and were still. But he did not stop screaming.

Moore, miles away, could almost hear the screams. Not really, of course, but in his mind. In his mind, Gaskill's shrieks of agony made a hymn, a symphony. Chuckling, he moved to the last easel. But there was really no need to rush things. "You, Mr. Diltant, can wait until tomorrow."

He was still smiling his satisfied smile the next day, when he went to see Diltant, his portfolio again under his arm. A pleased but not quite sated smile that remained on his face when a secretary spoke over her intercom to Diltant—"Mr. Moore to see you. He didn't have an appointment"—and Diltant's voice came back tense and frightened: "Show him in. Then you may go to lunch."

Diltant, frightened? Diltant, whose money could buy anything on earth? Moore's smile widened and became wider still when he stepped into Diltant's office.

The collector was no longer smug, no longer wrapped in his impenetrable cloak of self assurance. He was pale, and his expression was worried, wary. It did not need the newspaper lying on his desk to make Moore aware of why, but he gestured at the paper anyway.

"I see that you've already read what happened to them. Not very pretty, was it?"

But if he had expected Diltant to cringe, to beg, he was to be disappointed. The millionaire, frightened or not, was still what he was. He waited, said nothing. It was just as well. For the moment, the fear behind his eyes was enough to keep Moore satisfied. He would break soon enough.

Moore spoke slowly, distinctly. "You laughed when I told you that I was going to get my revenge through voodoo. All three of you laughed. But look what happened to the other two. Don't you feel like laughing now?"

Still no answer.

"No? Not even a smile? Very well, then. Gaskill and Breedley are ancient history now, in any case. So I guess it's your turn, isn't it?"

There was no shaking Diltant. With a shrug, Moore reached into his portfolio. Almost in the same breath, Diltant reached into an open drawer in his desk. There was a gun in his hand when Moore looked at him again.

"Well. Nervous, are you?" Moore was grinning. "Take it easy. I just want to show you something." Oh, this was delicious. Delicious! "See?" He had taken a painting—Diltant's portrait—from the portfolio. "Remarkable likeness, wouldn't you say?"

Holding the portrait so that Diltant could see it, he put his free hand into his inside coat pocket, and saw the collector's finger tighten on the trigger.

"Don't move."

"Why not?" Moore's hand had reappeared; in it he held a slim plastic rod. "It's only a pen. A red felt pen." His grin did not waver. "This will interest you. Watch."

Puzzled but still wary, Diltant stared as he drew in a red spot between the eyes of the portrait. The spot was neatly done, exactly placed in the center of the portrait's forehead.

And it was to exactly that spot on his own forehead that Diltant placed the muzzle of his gun. Moore could see the struggle in him, the horrified amazement in his eyes as his arm rose irresistibly of its own accord, as the cold metal touched his skin.

"No—"

So much Diltant managed. Then he pulled the trigger.

Clutching the portrait, Moore walked to the slumped corpse and looked down at it and began to laugh. He laughed hysterically, maniacally.

Then, suddenly, he was gasping, choking. The painting fell from his hands. Livid, he clutched at his throat. He was taking in air in great gulps, but it was as if the breaths he took contained no oxygen, as if he were in a vacuum—

"The safe! My portrait! There's no air in there!"

That had to be it! Stumbling, he ran from the office. He had to get back to his studio. His life depended on it! Had he failed to find an empty cab as soon as he emerged from the building, had he been delayed even for a few moments, he would never have made it. But his luck held. The rush hour was still hours away and the broad avenue outside the building swarmed with taxis. The driver of the one he hailed stared at him as he gasped and choked when he gave his address, but asked no questions. Not even when, from time to time, he turned to look back at Moore and Moore's face began to turn blue and his rasping efforts to draw air into his bursting lungs grew louder and louder.

Only sheer will power drove Moore at the end. His legs were rubber when they had reached the lodging house at last and he was climbing the stairs. Streaks of lightning seemed to be flashing before his eyes, blinding him, so that when he finally knelt before the safe he could barely make out the numbers pencilled on the scrap of paper that the landlord had given him. It took an inordinately long time to master the combination and swing open the heavy metal door.

Then—blessed relief! Life-giving oxygen flooded his lungs, drove the lightning from his eyes, wiped the squeezing, constricting pain from his chest. He could stand again, move again. Most importantly of all, he could think again. Holding the self-portrait carefully, he set it just as carefully on the easel that until today had supported the portrait of Diltant. The easel stood now just under the skylight and—a glance confirmed it—the sign painter still worked high above. But there would be no harm done even if the sign painter did see the painting.

Moore's smile of sudden recollection lit up his face. No, there would be no harm done if the sign painter saw the painting. There was nothing about *this* portrait to connect him with the tragedies that had overtaken Breedley and Fenton and Diltant—

Diltant! He had forgotten! The portrait of Diltant

that he had done still lay in Diltant's office! A portrait with a small red hole painted in on its forehead that exactly matched the wound in Diltant's forehead! A portrait that would excite questions, investigations!

"The picture—I've got to get it before they find him!"

There was a chance, just a bare chance, that he could get back to Diltant's office before Diltant's secretary returned. A slim chance, but it was all he had.

He was already running when he turned to the door. The stairs he took three at a time, hurtling down them like a projectile. He did not look back, did not look up again at the skylight. So he did not see when the sign painter stepped back to admire his work as he himself had so often done. He did not see the sign painter's foot touch the metal-capped can of turpentine that perched just on the edge of his scaffold.

The can crashed through the skylight, struck the easel below, and fell with the self-portrait, bouncing as it struck so that its metal cap loosened slightly and sent a small spray of liquid into the air before it came to rest.

If he had seen, Moore might have turned back even then. Instead, he ran on, into the street and then out into the roadway, his eyes seeking. But a quiet residential street does not attract cab drivers. Except for a few passersby and a few private cars the street was empty. Desperate, he looked at his watch. There was still time. Even if he took the underground.

Bent over and running with all his strength, he raced to the underground station at the corner and hurtled down the stairs. Below, the station platform was unusually crowded for this hour, but in his haste he barely noticed. Pushing and elbowing, he shoved his way to the edge of the platform and there leaned far out over the tracks, straining to see along the tunnel. No train was in sight.

To be so close to absolute victory and yet so close, too, to utter defeat was agonizing. But there was nothing he could do. Nerves screaming, he waited.

And at last there was a distant rumble. At last the platform under his feet vibrated and a headlight appeared far down the black tube that was the tunnel.

The train was just roaring into the station when the crowd surged forward. It flowed around him like an amoeba, pressing harder and harder. And in his eagerness he did not realize that he was being pushed closer and closer to the edge of the platform. It was not until someone's elbow punched hard against his ribs and sent him off balance that he realized what was happening and tried to recover himself. But it was no use. Suddenly he was falling, twisting in mid-air, so that he landed on the tracks on his hands and knees.

He did not even cry out. There was just time enough for him to scramble to his feet, to think one last thought, before the train was on him. Above him, someone screamed in horror and then the onrushing metal monster took him squarely in the face and hurled him backward. He no longer had a face, then. Where his face had been there was an inchoate mass of bloody pulp, and when he came to rest it was as if he were no more than a lifeless sack of broken sticks.

It was fitting, though, that his last thought, just before the train struck him, had been what it was. Even in that moment, even as death rushed at him, he had been thinking of his revenge. Thinking and wondering. Wondering what had gone wrong.

But how could he have understood?

In the studio, his self portrait lay on the floor, and on the portrait rested the can of turpentine that had crashed through the skylight. It had taken a little while, but enough liquid to form a small pool on the canvas had at last seeped out from under the can's loosened cap. And the results were disastrous.

The turpentine had dissolved away the paint, liquefied it, so that the pigments had run together as though stirred by an idiot child. The portrait no longer had a face. What remained was an unrecognizable, inchoate mass of intermingled color that bore a sickening resemblance to bloody pulp.

11

The club was suddenly cold. As cold as the echoing corridors above had been. Cold with the same damp cold that Rogers had felt as he waited for the elevator.

"So that's your story." Critchit, aware of the cold, chose to ignore it. "Well, we all have our little cross to bear, don't we?"

His attempt to lighten the moment fell on deaf ears. The others were not amused. Trembling a little with the sudden chill, they were watching Moore.

Critchit tried again. "Don't we?"

The artist did not seem to have heard him. "It seems so real. Almost as if it happened."

"Happened?"

"Or could happen."

Critchit's snort was interrupted by Rogers. "Mine, too."

Maitland nodded. "And mine."

"And mine." Sebastian, too, had joined the chorus.

All of them were deadly serious. And despite himself, Critchit was shivering. It was the cold, of course. He said, "And my story, strange as it may be, is with me all the time." For a moment he was quiet. But the

thought that had begun to clamor in his head would not be still. "Do you think that our fears could be a—a warning of some sort? A warning of what *may* happen?"

"Nonsense!" Rogers was again too vehement, too insistent.

But no one disputed him. There was no time. Behind them there was a sound—ping!—and as they turned, the pink UP light above the elevator doors blinked on.

It was in that moment, too, as they got to their feet, that the chairs and the table and the sporting prints and the carpet vanished. It was in that moment that the blocks that comprised the walls seemed to fuse together and became, indeed, solid slabs of concrete that glittered with tiny beads of condensation.

"What—" Maitland tried to speak and could not.

"This place—it looks like a vault!" Sebastian, though he managed the words, choked on them. "Where *are* we?"

As if in reply, the doors of the elevator slid open. But not to reveal a well lighted interior glistening with chrome. Beyond the doors there was blackness.

Slowly, unwillingly, as though propelled by some will far stronger than their own, the five men moved toward that empty blackness and, at the doorway, stood in a tight, agonized little group and stared terrified into that emptiness. Into it and beyond it, as if at something in the distance. Perhaps a minute ticked off. Then, gradually, the terror left their faces. Gradually, the fear that had etched lines in their foreheads dissipated and their eyes took on a light of recognition.

"Well, it's time to go back to our homes." Moore was the first to step into the blackness. The others, except for Critchit, followed without hesitation. Critchit stood where he was, unmoving. Only after a little while did he lift a hand as though waving after them.

He could see them quite clearly. They were walking across a landscape that was dark except for the tombstones that shone palely on all sides of them. They were in a cemetery, and when they turned to wave back at him their faces were no longer as they had been. Their lips and noses had vanished. Their eyes were empty holes. Their skin hung in rotting ribbons and a stench of decaying flesh drifted back to him as they turned again and went on and then halted, each beside his own grave, and disappeared like puffs of smoke.

Only Critchit remained, then. Wearily, he too turned, and wearily walked back into the vault. There was no one to hear, but he spoke aloud. "That's how it is and always will be, night after night—" A dry sob came into his voice. "Telling our stories every night—and each morning forgetting . . ."

His dragging feet slowed, halted. He was standing by the coffin, then. The lights had gone too, but he could still see it. An old coffin that rested on a mildewed concrete base in the center of the vault.

"Night after night, morning after morning, for all eternity—"

He moved on, closer to the coffin, stood by it—and vanished as the others had vanished.

The little that was left of him rested in the coffin, ugly and unmourned, and he never knew when the sun rose and lit up the weatherbeaten exterior of the vault where it squatted amid the other graves in the cemetery.

And so it would be. Night, after night, after night . . .

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